Western Story Magazine

Every Week

Oct. 19, 1929

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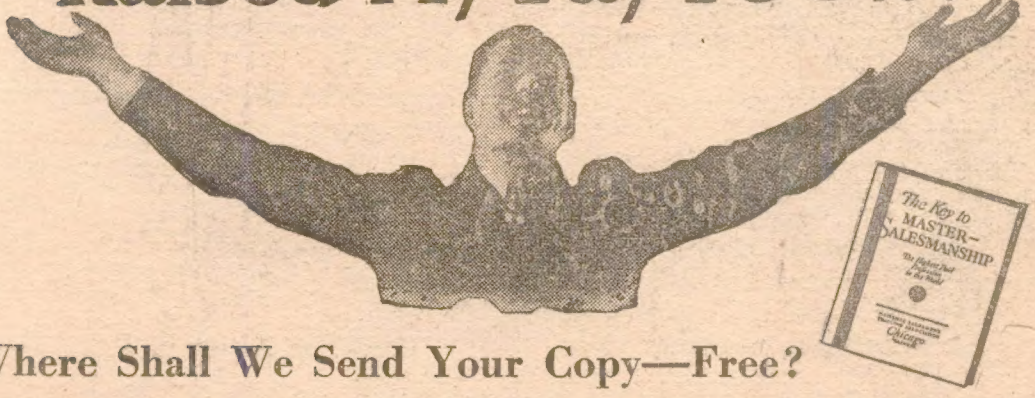

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"LOOK.... he's imitating a pianist!"

.....someone shouted Then a queer thing happened

JACK had strummed some "Blues" for us on his uke and Nan had just finished her screamingly funny burlesque on the "Kinkajou." We were all set for dancing when—the radio refused to work!

No amount of jiggling brought it to life, either. In spite of our best efforts, all we could get from that confounded radio was such desolate howls that the girls begged us to leave the poor old thing alone.

Someone made a half-hearted suggestion of bridge. But Tom had a better plan. Pulling Joe to his feet—good old "sit-in-the-corner" Joe, whom everyone liked to pick on—he cried in a loud voice:

"Just a minute, folks! The party is saved! Joe, here, has kindly offered to enliven the proceedings with a piano solo . . ."

Loud cheering drowned out the rest. This promised to be good—for, as we all knew, Joe couldn't play a note. Naturally we expected him to clown . . .

Just as he sat down at the piano, Tom called out:

"Play 'The Varsity Drag'—that's a hot dance number!"

I couldn't help smiling at the thought of Joe—who had always taken a back seat at our parties—playing "hot" music. Excited whispers came from all parts of the room. "Wonder what he's going to do!"—"He doesn't know one note from another!" Suddenly someone shouted:

"Get this! Look—he's imitating a pianist!"

A Queer Thing Happens

Raising his hand melodramatically, Joe waited a moment to command silence.

Then, without any more preliminaries, and to the complete amazement of us all, he struck the first bars of—"The Varsity Drag!"

And how! With all the verve and expression of a professional! No wonder Tom's eyes almost popped out of his head! This wasn't the clowning he had expected Joe to do!

Unable to resist the tantalizing music, couple after couple glided around the floor. When Joe stopped playing, the applause could have been heard around the block—only to be instantly followed by requests for more numbers.

All evening they kept Joe busy at the piano—playing jazz, popular songs, sentimental ballads, even classical stuff—everything the crowd asked for, and they asked for plenty!

How that lad could play! I was dumbfounded. Why, it was incredible! Joe had always seemed to be a "born wallflower"—he had never displayed any talent for entertaining—yet now . . . I determined to solve the puzzle. On the way home that night I drew Joe aside and demanded:

"How on earth did you do it?"

He laughed. "Why, it was very easy! I simply took that home-study course in music your cousin told us about . . ."

"You don't mean that course that was supposed to show you how to play without a teacher, do you?" I interrupted.

"That's it! Say, it's a great course, all right!" he enthused. "There wasn't any expensive private teacher to pay—and since the lessons came by mail, I didn't have to set aside valuable hours for study. In fact, I practiced only in my spare time, a few minutes a day. And the course is thorough! Why, almost before I knew it, I was playing simple pieces by note, and . . ."

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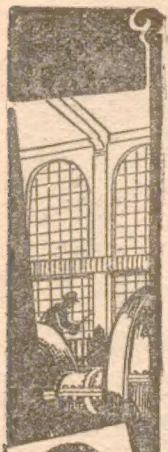

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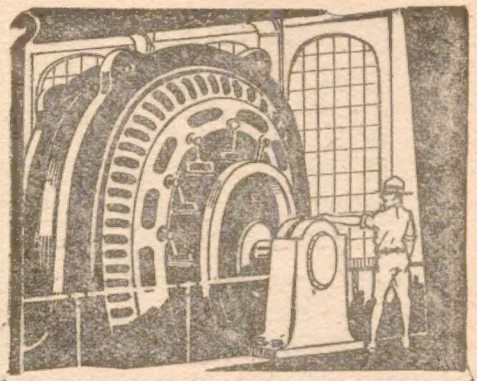

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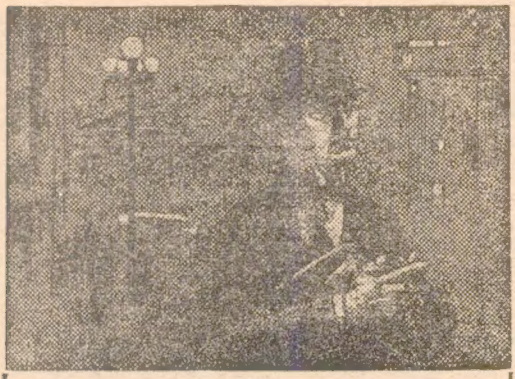

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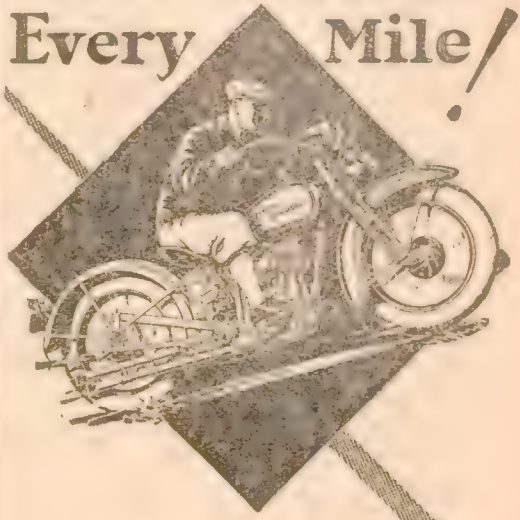

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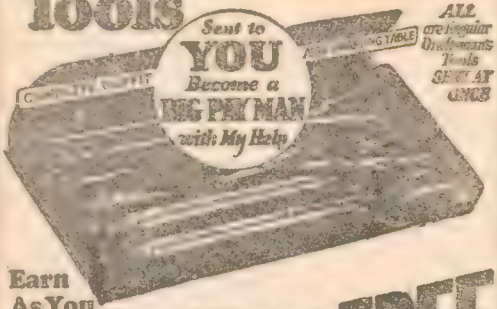

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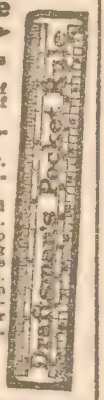

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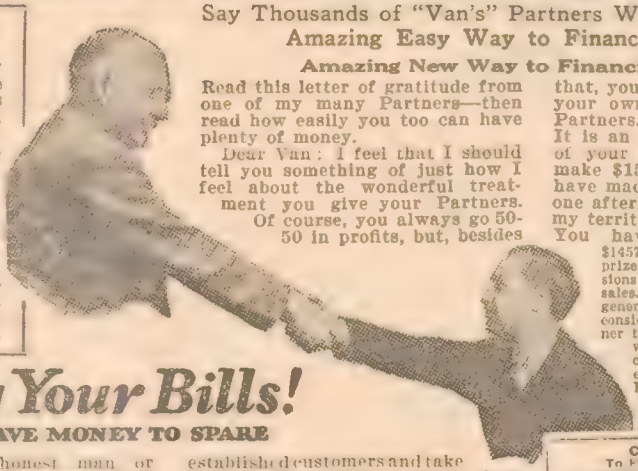

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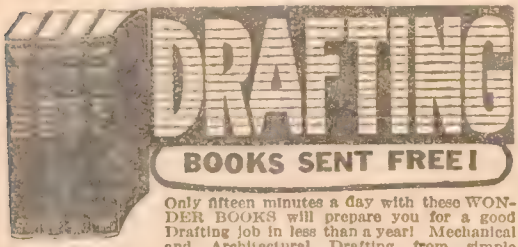

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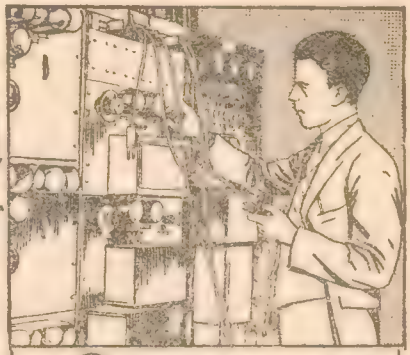

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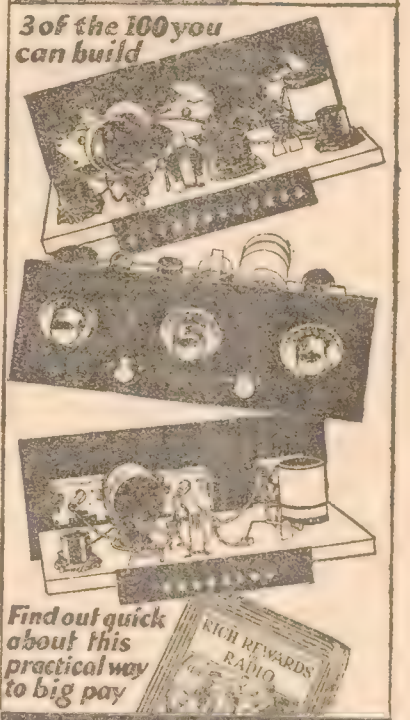

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Windy Rides 'Em Rough

By Robert Ormond Case

Author of "The Yukon Drive," etc.

CHAPTER I.

"WINDIED" FINANCE.

ON rawhide-upholstered chairs against the southwest wall of Flannigan's Place, major oasis of amusement and refreshment that flourished along Condon's main thoroughfare, "Lonesome" McQuirk and "Windy" DeLong, partners, reposed on sections of their anatomy approximating their shoulder blades, and peered forth upon the sweltering environs with languid disinterest.

Because the lethargy of Saturday afternoon in midsummer was upon the world, the place was all but deserted at the moment. There were, in fact, but two others abroad in the establishment. One of these, Flannigan, the proprietor, leaned hairy arms on the bar in an attitude of repose, a jaundiced eye following the gyrations of an energetic insect that circled, buzzardlike, in the listless air. At Windy's right a pock-marked person with a cleft lip, a citizen of hard appearance, slumped in his chair and snored softly.

To the casual eye, the partners, too, belonged to the ranks of those who toil

and spin not and yet were no lilies of the field. Viewed from a distance, they were merely a brace of dusty and colorless old-timers, with no more claim to distinction than the sage-clad slopes beyond the city limits where the heat waves danced. Yet a certain nameless authority surrounded them and gave them force. Restful though their postures were, they were not relaxed. Windy yawned at intervals, his black mustache bristling into the semblance of a ferocious snarl; but his glittering eyes were alert, and one booted foot tapped impatiently on the ancient floor. Lonesome, more calm and unruffled as was his habit, tugged thoughtfully at his tawny, drooping mustache, and his leathery cheek bulged with an enormous chew.

Though they sat side by side in apparently congeniai lethargy, there was upon them an air of constraint more than suggestive of some slight difference of opinion. Windy's manner was that of one who strives to gather about him the belligerence of a crusader who knows that his cause is just; but the very truculence of his saturnine features hinted at an inner chagrin. Lonesome's pale-blue eyes were not exactly gloating. He radiated sympathy. His pose revealed the lofty tolerance of one who has predicted grief, and contemplates the fulfillment of that prediction with exasperating fortitude.

Windy was aware of his partner's attitude, and resented it bitterly. Yet because he was enmeshed in a species of dilemma from which there appeared, at the moment, to be no way out, he was somewhat at a loss as to how to proceed in the technical business of "saving his face." And the fact that Lonesome, with the calmness of a gambler who holds the winning hand, sat back and waited for him to proceed to further futile struggles, figuratively burned him to a crisp.

The foundations for the "jack pot" in which he now found himself had been laid that morning at their homestead when he, Windy, had risen to greet the flaming dawn in the grip of a full-fledged inspiration. In the dark hours of the night it had come to him, stealing surreptitiously into his mind as a timid, quaking shadow of a thought that had remained to grow into a behemoth idea. Its very simplicity made it impressive.

Why should he and McQuirk, products of lurid years and harsh experience, men of energy and vision, precisely equipped by nature for the accomplishment of big things, continue to live a species of vegetable existence in a region where vast potentialities slumbered? Were they bitten by the bacillus lassitude, victims of senile decay and rickets? Why pursue their profitless, penny-ante activities, in the grip of jellyfish ambition, when a logical and obvious course of action was before them?

For the way was plain, so he had announced with conviction. They would mortgage the homestead, outfit, and cattle for three-four thousand. With this capital they would buy more breeding stock, more land, build up bigger herds, gradually fence the range for miles around. They would create a cattle empire. Ten, twenty, perhaps forty thousand head bearing the McQuirk-DeLong brand. Cowhands in such numbers as to line up in squad formation at pay day. Then begin to cash in on the prime stuff. Money pouring in. Their bank balance swelling by leaps and bounds. When they rolled by, folks would say: "There's McQuirk an' DeLong. Who'd have thought those mavericks had it in them? I remember when they didn't have nothin' and proud of it. Now look at 'em. Rotten wealthy. Barrels of money. How do they get that way?"

There were also, Windy had pointed out, certain other economic aspects to

the situation. By contrast to the affluence within their grasp was the dark future before them should they fail to cash in on their natural energy and vision.

"McQuirk," he had averred, "it's one of them ringing truths. Whereas you an' me had ought to be settin' in a no-limit game, we're wastin' the best years of our lives playin' casino. Gents of our ability, energy, an' mental caliber—an' take note of my generous instincts in includin' you in them specifications—had ought to be hefty citizens of these parts. Instead of which, how do we stack up? A couple of busted-down mavericks in a flea-bitten wilderness. Time's movin' on, folks is bettering their hands all around us, an' we're settin' still. Life's just one of them continuous things in which Tuesdays is likewise Thursdays, an' all we're doin' is gettin' old. Pretty soon we'll be leanin' on canes an' cacklin' 'Heh! Heh!' Folks'll groan when they see us limpin' over the horizon an' the sound of our creakin' bones comes down with the wind. 'Here's them rickety ancients,' they'll say. 'Give' em a handout an' pass 'em on. How come the county don't do something about such indigent neighborhood pests? This neck of the woods has been haunted by them toothless lobos long enough. Something ought to be done about it.'

"Yeah, an' other folks'll shake their heads an' say: 'The poor farm's plumb crowded,' they'll say. 'An', anyway, them mavericks are too cross-grained an' ornery to get along with the rest of the old soldiers. Leave 'em struggle along. We just got to make the best of it. Give 'em a crust now an' then, an' a bacon rind. Anything to keep 'em satisfied.' "

Lonesome, who had witnessed and survived more than one example of what he callously was wont to term his partner's "mental gymnastics," had failed to be impressed by this doleful picture. At first, not realizing how thoroughly Windy had sold himself on his scintillating scheme, he had attempted to brush the matter aside and had spoken cheerfully of certain post holes they had purposed to sink along the line fence. Then, becoming aware that Windy was prepared to ride the colossal idea to a finish, he had trained his verbal artillery upon it and manfully strove to sweep it from the realm of reasonable things.

In vain, Lonesome had brought up old ghosts of the past and marched them in review, pointing to early lurid years along the Rio Grande, the Pecos, and points north where, as top hands in a hard school, they had achieved the precarious pinnacle of gun fighters and a vast weariness of heart. Into the placid Condon country they had come and paused to look about them with the awed and unbelieving gaze of those who see the substance of dreams come true. Here were no wars nor rumors of wars, echoes of conflict or guerilla campaigns. In these sun-drenched hills, men worked and played, tilled soil that was free, walked with their dreams, and died—in peace. It was like emerging from the dust of a bitter trail to stand knee-deep in a verdant meadow beside a smiling river; like crossing a burning desert and hearing about them the buzzing of the bees and lowing of the cattle in the promised land.

They had friends, Lonesome had pointed out, neighbors whose ways they understood. They were possessed of as neat an outfit as a pessimist could ask for—a quarter of deeded ground, a spring and a shack and a jag of beef. They were eating three meals a day, sleeping regularly, and snoring in unison. After soul-deadening years, their lives now unfolded along pleasant trails. No more, for them, long days of toil and nights of danger, taut nerves and instincts perpetually alert against possible ambush, games whose stakes were

Death. They had found rest and peace. What more could be asked of fate?

But to no avail had Lonesome advanced these arguments that had in them no slightest suggestion of humor or facetious intent, but were rooted in ultimate truths that both knew, at heart, to be beyond dispute. Windy's enthusiasm would brook no restraint. He had admitted the force of Lonesome's logic, in so far as it referred to their earlier career. But the past was past, he had loudly averred. The future lay before them. Old age and indigence were just around the corner. The time had come to brush trivialities and sentiment aside and prepare ruthlessly to amass capital as a bulwark against their declining years.

Under an onslaught bristling with inspired rhetoric, Lonesome had weakened and yielded. Experience had told him that it was useless to do otherwise, for when Windy was astride an idea it was his habit to stay in the saddle with the grimness of a "world" cowboy in the finals at Pendleton. Nothing but explosive circumstances could serve to shake him loose.

"Let's go," he had growled. "No use me rarin' back when one of yore haywire hunches has got a foul hold on you. Only thing is, DeLong, when you get logos of the bogos complicated by the screamin' Willies, it's me that's the superheated goat. You're the one that's infected with the ideas, but I do the itchin'."

Thus they had sallied forth to town, leaving the digging of post holes to a rosy future when this menial labor would be performed by some brawny worker on their pay roll; and immediately, as they called one by one upon the money barons of the cattle metropolis, Lonesome's usual good spirits and bland benevolence had returned.

For Windy found himself checkmated at the start. In his own phraseology, he was "left at the post." The money lenders had listened to his plans with polite interest. They had nodded understandingly, mouthing their cigars. They had smiled, but their eyes were mirthless and almost bored. Yes, the partners had a reasonably fair quarter under fence, they had agreed. They brushed aside Windy's enthusiasm concerning the excellence of the water in the spring, the sturdiness of the buildings, and the unparalleled quality of beef and saddle string. They were familiar with the land and equipment. But they were loaning no money on farm land at present; nor on beef. The cattle industry was too unstable; the money market unsettled. They would advance a small amount, perhaps, on their promissory note at a high rate of interest and a confidential bonus, but three or four thousand, or hundred, was out of the question.

"Bah!" Windy had growled, as the last of the dispensers of credit had ushered them forth, beaming polite nothings concerning the weather. "These white-collared money sharks is my idea of cooties on the body politic. Bury 'em, an' there'd be nothin' there but a hole in the ground. Sure they'll make us a whale of a big loan. Fifty dollars, by gravy, providin' we put up our right eyes as collateral, pay the interest in advance, an' promise to lift our hats to 'em when we pass 'em on the street! Let's drag over to Flannigan's an' rest our feet before I commit some new brands of justifiable homicide. Let just one more of them pink-cheeked bozos grin at me pitying-like I was touched with the heat, an' I'll sprout horns an' beller like a bull."

Together they had slouched into the shadowed and sweltering portals of Flannigan's, where, after imbibing a quantity of near-beer and exchanging profitless personalities with the languid proprietor, they had retired to the rawhide-upholstered wall chairs for a period of meditation.

Lonesome was too old a campaigner to suggest immediately that they repair to the homestead and direct their attention again to the post holes along the line fence. Such ruthless tactics, with Windy standing knee-deep, as it were, in the débris of shattered illusions, would have been in the nature of pouring salt on an open wound. Time must be given his hard-bitten partner to readjust himself to harsh realities, to turn from contemplation of the royal purple. in a manner of speaking, and don again the habiliments of the slave.

Lonesome knew, too, the value of silence in a moment like this. To make it binding, Windy must reach his bitter conclusions alone. Should he, Lonesome, utter a word suggestive of sympathy, or understanding, or justifiable gloating, the resulting forensic upheaval would shatter the balance of the already depleted afternoon. Discretion and forbearance, an inner voice told him, were the better part of valor.

The very quiet of the place wrought benignly on his mood; and in the same ratio, he knew, it was slowly reducing his energetic and irascible partner to a frenzy. Thus they sat for a considerable space in a stillness broken only by the snoring of the sleeper on their right, the sighs of Flannigan as he shifted to a more comfortable position, and the loud ticking of a clock above the beveled mirror beyond the bar.

To Lonesome's chagrin, at the very moment when the signs indicated that Windy was approaching some species of mental crossroad that must inevitably lead to action, an interruption occurred in the form of an ancient, disreputable, and bearded person who shuffled in from the street. Merely because this one represented the sole sign of animation within his range of vision, Windy's glittering gaze fixed upon the newcomer. Lonesome eyed him, too, and Flannigan shifted his bullet head to peer languidly in that direction.

The ancient one was worthy of little attention, it appeared. Yet the partners' glance followed him as he shambled to the bar, leaned upon it and held muttered converse with Flannigan. The latter, with the jaundiced air of one who, expecting little, is rarely disappointed, drew a glass of water and placed it on the bar. His non-paying customer downed it at a gulp, and wiped his beard with the back of a gnarled and hamlike hand. Turning, his singularly hard and malignant eye swept the room and came to rest on the partners. He considered them for a space, then detached himself from the bar and shambled toward them.

With a feeling akin to mild pity, Lonesome noted his bearing was that of one who purposes to make conversation. A denizen of the high desert, whose lonely soul craved a little neighboring with other apparently restful ones, could not have chosen a more inopportune moment for such a gregarious gesture; for Windy, in a manner of speaking, was "loaded for bear." Almost, as the other drew near, Lonesome could feel his partner stiffen belligerently, like an exceedingly short-tempered mongrel who marks the approach of an unsuspecting victim.

In blissful ignorance or callous disregard of impending doom, the unfortunate one dragged up a chair, seated himself heavily, drew forth a corncob pipe, lighted it, pressed down the glowing coals with a horny thumb, and bent grizzled brows upon the pair.

"Howdy, snakes," he growled in an offhand manner. "Nice day, ain't it?"

CHAPTER II.

A WOLF FROM ANTONE.

TO this greeting, Lonesome murmured an appropriate reply. But Windy said nothing. His glittering gaze, beginning at the floor, rose slowly over the other's person, taking note of

the heavy brogans that encased his feet, the faded overalls whose numerous lacerations and rents were curiously and cunningly held together by short, twisted sections of haywire, the hickory shirt, open at the throat, disclosing a segment of hairy and muscular neck, and so came to rest on the bewhiskered and irritatingly self-possessed features from which the short-stemmed pipe projected at a belligerent angle.

The ancient one did not flinch beneath the piercing intentness of Windy's appraisal. He gave back stare for stare, his eyes, in their hirsute background, like sullen pools surrounded by thick underbrush. It was his next pronouncement that told Lonesome that here was no victim, but a Tartar worthy of Windy's steel.

"If you get down to cases," he informed Windy frankly, "you wouldn't take no beauty prize yoreself. I ain't flatterin' myself none by admittin' that when it comes to elegant appearance an' that there manly beauty, you an' me is a stand-off. But what of it? Many a mangy hide covers good beef. We'll give you the benefit of the doubt." He settled himself more comfortably in his chair. "I've done advanced the opinion it's a nice day, an' I aim to cling to it regardless."

"McQuirk," said Windy, "it's plain that here's one of them gents from the unfenced spaces who's rarin' to make talk. A blunt, outspoken lad with the social instincts of a wart-hog. Whereas I ain't in a position to boast about ever meetin' up with him before, I'm too danged honest to claim the present occasion is a pleasure. Just you stagger along under the white man's burden by listenin' to his idle chatter. If I snore too loud, chide me gently."

"Profitless personalities," averred the other, "is fodder for mentalities that is undernourished. To give this social occasion the proper tone, I'll admit right at the start that I got a crust to ease my onery carcass into such distinguished company. Some folks who ain't been around as much as me would say offhand that you was a couple of weary willies who'd missed the glory trail. But bein' a discernin' hombre who's something of an authority on horned toads, Gila monsters, sand fleas, an' such, it's plain to me that you're a pair of nature's noblemen in disguise. Gents of substance an' heavy mentality who happen to be takin' their ease in this hobo's roost just for the purpose of lookin' over the *hoy polloy* an' findin' out what the mavericks think about." He nodded, somberly sucking at his pipe. "Yes, indeed. An' now that we're off to a flying start this a way, is it a nice day, or ain't it?"

"It was," said Windy, "till you showed up. Funny that a couple of gents can't rest an' meditate without a disreputable mountain of animated junk movin' in on 'em like a lobo slopin' for tall timber. If I'm a feller that's interested in the said *hoy polloy,* I've shorely got a first-rate example right smack in front of me. High on the *hoy* and wide on the *polloy.* But to get down to brass tacks, mister, just what you got on yore mind, if any? If they's something concealed behind that underbrush besides loose conversation, let's have it. I like to get them necessary evils over pronto."

"I'm lookin' for a couple of lads named McQuirk an' DeLong," stated the other. "Folks pointed you out with some of that there community pride that I ain't inquirin' into too close. When I busted up to you-all now, I was about to inquire which of you was the wolf named Windy. But I ain't in the dark no more. Not bein' deaf, I got you placed. Don't you deny it, mister. You're Windy DeLong himself."

"In person," agreed Windy. "The man-hunt has drawn to a close, an' I got my back to the wall. What you

aimin' to inflict on me besides the pleasure of yore company? Make it snappy, old-timer. I ain't one of them impatient critters, nor yet pressed for time, but a feller's only got one life to live."

"I get you," said the ancient one. "More energetic than you look. It's a break for me that I done tracked you down whilst you was resting between roarin' spells. Well, sir, I'll make it short an' snappy, like the fodder to which you claim to be accustomed. But first I crave to inquire into one of them mysterious things. How come you unlovely hombres rate as ace-high citizens of these parts? Who sold the pop-eyed populace on the theory that you buzzards cast a shadow even on a cloudy day, that in any deal in which yore fancy led you to take a hand the odds thereafter was even, and if some lowly maverick had drained a bitter cup, was facin' his Waterloo an' ready to call it a day, an' could get you longhorns to back his play, he wouldn't be standin' alone no more but headin' an army? I ain't a pessimist, you understand, but after sixty-five Christmases a gent can't help but suspect they ain't any Santa Claus. I ain't doubtin' yore specifications none. I was just inquirin'."

"It's one of them gross libels," stated Windy, his black eyes glittering. "Me an' McQuirk ain't any knights in shinin' armor. Our swords is rusty an' our lights is dim. If we got any such reputations in these parts, just you discount 'em an hundred per cent an' take the rest with a grain of salt. We ain't sprouted no wings an' taken up harp-playin' as a regular pastime. They's tufts on our ears an' thumbs on our feet. Where we cast a shadow the grass don't grow no more. We're so hard we sleep on rocks, shave with a blow torch, an' open up cans of pork an' beans with our thumb nails. I ain't tryin' to discourage you, old son. I'm just tellin' you. It's plain you've come slopin' around figgerin' we're adjusters of things that ain't right, protectors of the downtrodden or some such bleary-eyed nonsense. Might as well get it straight. We're rattlin', poison mean, crooked as overgrown pretzels, an' so onery we growl in our sleep."

"All that, huh?" questioned the other. "Well, let it pass. We'll get to the meat of this business. You're probably wonderin' who I am an' how come I done forced myself upon yore notice this a way."

"It don't make no difference," Windy yawned. "But since you're strugglin' in the grip of the urge to make talk, it might as well be about that as anything else."

"I've lived in these parts for a considerable spell," said the old-timer. "Maybe forty years. Down along the Antone."

"Yeah?" Windy cut in. "You can pass up the rest of it, mister. I got you placed now. I've heard about you, just like you hear about the seven-year itch an' the winter of the blue snow. One of them mangy hermits who cotton to their own company regardless. You come to town maybe once a year, an' right after the Piute War was the last time anybody was in yore shack. Just you slide over them forty years casual, an' proceed. How come we're the goats the first time you come out of yore roost lookin' for a victim is what we crave action on. Is it the accumulated conversation of a half century of livin' alone that you're fixin' to unload on us?"

The ancient one knocked the ashes from his pipe, refilled it, tamped down the tobacco with a broad, scarred thumb.

"I didn't always live alone," he said, puffing slowly. "I had a woman once."

"Yeah?" said Windy. "An' after lookin' at you acrost the table three times a day for as long as she could stand it, she pulled her freight, huh?

Vamosed. Flew the coop. Is that it? Well, mister, at the head of the list of things that me an' McQuirk don't know nothin' about, is wimmin. As advisers to lonely hearts, we ain't got the standing of a one-legged Chinaman."

"No," said the other. "After doin' her part as a reg'lar woman for twenty-five years, scrubbin' the floors of the shack and cookin' good vittles, not doin' any complainin' when the trail had rocks in it, strengthenin' my arm when we was down to the last chip, an' holdin' out patient up to the very day when our luck broke an' it looked like we could set back an' take it easy for a spell, she died."

"Excuse it," said Windy. "That was a tough break."

"I had a gal named Mattie," continued the ancient one, his sullen eyes fixed on the curling smoke. "Within a year after her maw died, they was a no-account hoss-trader come projectin' around. A curly-headed bozo built like one of them Greek athletes, an' a smooth talker. Name of Parsons. Mattie hadn't seen many young folks, an' this lizard looked like a candy-coated humdinger on wheels."

"Why didn't you run him off the place?" questioned Windy. "Fill him full of buckshot an' call it a day?"

"I was ponderin' that very chore," admitted the other, "when she went out for a walk one mornin an' didn't come back. Eloped with this buzzard, by gravy, married him an' pulled out for Montana! She never come back."

"That," said Windy, "has all the earmarks of a horse on you. This curly-headed, upstandin' young gent meant to do right by yore gal all the while. Fillin' prospective son-in-laws full of buckshot is just like tryin' to give 'em advice. It's passay. It ain't done any more. Aimin' to keep a couple of young things apart who've done made up their minds to undertake the chains of matrimony is one of them chores where a feller's licked before he starts. Now let's agree that in that particular you was in error, old son, an' hurry on."

"They located in Booth City," said the ancient one. "She wrote to me several times. Around Christmas time. But bein' peeved that a way I never answered her. 'Bout six years ago she quit writin'."

"Tough," Windy nodded. "Havin' lost yore woman through designs of fate whose pattern is too deep for lowly mortals to follow, you lost yore gal through yore own meanness. Yeah. An' now that we've done assimilated yore family history. old son, let's get together an' agree that life's full of problems, flesh is frail, humanity is prone to err an' whichever way you go from here it's worse. Bein' understandin' gents, we're sympathizin' with you. It's agreed that if you had another life to live you'd do it different. But you ain't, so what's the odds?" He yawned again, his mustache bristling. "All of which rounds out this neighborly discussion an' likewise fetches it to a plumb enjoyable close. If this weather keeps up, the summer grass is ruined, huh?"

"You're hard," said the other. "But just hold yore quiverin' ears at attention for a minnit longer. When a feller's lost in an impen'trable forest, he ain't gettin' into no argument with his guide on account of the unlovely maverick havin' a wart on his nose. Just why I'm hopefully waitin' for pearls of wisdom from you cross-grained longhorns is another one of them mysteries. You ain't family men."

"Now listen," said Windy. "Question our patience if you feel that a way, but don't cast no slurs on our authority. The fact that we ain't family men is one of them inconsequential details. You don't have to be an ape to understand monkeys. The feller that knows the most about the habits an' problems

of honey-bees never stung a man in his life."

"True," agreed the ancient one. "Sounds reasonable. Well, it's this a way. When Mattie run off with this bright-eyed young hoss-trader, I set back an' said to myself that it's a long lane that has no rocks in it. Pretty soon Mattie'll come projectin' around lookin' for help. Young ones to feed, an' bills to pay, an' etcetera. When that time comes she'll figger that her old dad was of some use in the scheme of things after all. But the time never come. All her letters told how well they was doin'. 'Bright-eyes' had bought him a livery stable in Booth City. And a blacksmith shop also. Started a drug store an' undertaking parlors. Built him a hotel an' is vice-president of the bank. One of them stalwart pillars of the community. Filthy prosperous. The more I heard about it, the more it burned me up. Mattie didn't need me a-tall. Nor her young ones. I was out in the cold. Plumb useless that a way"

"Now there's a point," said Windy. "A penny-ante detail which still looms up like a Christmas tree. If she had needed this said financial assistance, you'd have been some embarrassed. If you're loaded down with filthy lucre, things ain't what they seem. Not bein' unduly personal, you savvy, even an onobservin' gent would lay odds you didn't have the price of a store shave. So if Mattie an' the young ones needed money, an' you was within earshot of their yodels of distress. you'd be out on a limb."

"Which proves a contention I've always clung to," said the old-timer. "From the looks of a horned toad you can't tell how far he can jump. The fact that I run heavy to whiskers don't mean I'm aimin' to bust up the barbers' trust. Maybe it's on account of hoss-flies, an' maybe it's for purposes of shade. If I indulge my ambition for fancy needlework by throwin' a couple half-hitches of haywire in my jeans, the same is nobody's business."

From a cavernous pocket he drew forth a roll of currency of substantial proportions. There were fifty or more, it appeared, and all of ample denomination. He riffled them carelessly and as carelessly returned them to his pocket.

"So?" said Windy sourly. "In addition to the rest of your uselessness, you're well-heeled, huh? Well, old son, don't you make a habit of flashin' that roll too promiscuous, or you'll be surprised at the interest folks'll take in you."

"I ain't showin' my hand for the purposes of idle boasting." said the ancient one, "but to give point to my argument. This chicken feed is only a sample. You're the first hombres to whom I ever give a hint that I had any coin of the realm salted away. It's likewise the first time in twenty years I ever unloaded my private an' particular brand of misery on my unsuspecting an' disregardful fellow man." His whiskers curled into the semblance of a sneer. "I used to carry them shekels just for the feelin' of having the bulge on the world. Some folks carry a rabbit's foot that a way. But like all them voodoo charms, its usefulness done petered out."

Windy rolled a cigarette with languid fingers, lighted it, and blew a cloud of smoke upward. He fixed the other with a glittering eye.

"Now," he said, "in this list of depressin' circumstances we've gotten down to bedrock. Besides intelligent nods, understandin' growls, an heartfelt grunts of sympathy, what else do you crave, mister? It's plain you ain't bashful or retirin', so speak right out. Just what you want from us, old son?"

"Nothin'," said the other, and for the first time there was a vague suggestion of humility in his bearing. "Nothin' but a little advice."

"If advice was dollars," said Windy, "we'd carry our wealth around in box cars. On what particular point do you crave enlightenment?"

"On the whole layout," said the ancient one. He refilled his pipe and his gnarled fingers trembled a little. "Ever since I was old enough to struggle along I thought I had this vale of tears all figgered. I'd mind my own business, play 'em close to my belt, an' when the time come I'd cash in an' spend the profits. Now the time's come, an' where am I at? I've got a stack of chips, but the rest of the players have done dropped out. I'm facin' an empty table. Seems like life's a kind of a game which I've been playing blind. Question is, what's it all about, who says so, an' how come?"

"H'm," said Windy, "I get you. After sixty-five years of follerin' yore own bull-headed way regardless an' findin' yoreself neck-deep in the coils of error, you crave to have an upstandin' gent like me tell you how come you missed the glory trail, huh? An' in a few choice words. Well, old son, if I was in my usual sunny an' cheerful frame of mind, I'd politely tell you that I ain't any tombstone salesman. But it just happens that you've popped up at the precise time when I'm in the proper mood to enumerate somebody else's shortcomings. So if you'll get a holt of yoreself an' hang on, I'll be happy to oblige. Remember, now, you brought it on yoreself. When I get through with you, yore own friends wouldn't know you. If you was to meet yourself in a dark alley, you'd yell for the police."

"Wait," demurred Lonesome at this point. It was the first time, since the old-timer had forced himself upon their notice, that he had taken a part in the discussion. "I been lookin' this gent over, DeLong. He's earnestly seekin' knowledge. Don't bear down too brutal-like——"

But the ancient one raised a restraining hand.

"Give him all the rope he needs," he pleaded. "My feelin's don't have to be handled with gloves, like a prickly pear. I ain't got the tender sensibilities of a graven image. All I crave is to bask in the white light of truth. Mister, gimme the works."

CHAPTER III.

THE LAST CARD.

BLOWING a cloud of smoke upward, Windy fixed his glittering gaze on the ceiling and relaxed like one who faces a pleasing prospect. A more bland mood enveloped him, as though his ears were attuned in advance to the sonorous cadences of his own rhetoric.

"First, old son," he said, "we'll give yore present status the once over, an' then sprint lightly through them dusty halls of the past. As the sheriff told the hoss thief before they hung him, the future's yore problem, an' all we can do is give you a good send-off and wish you luck.

"Out to yore shack on Antone Creek, I got a picture of you in them lonely hours that has done sneaked up on you recent. It's night time, maybe, an' you're settin' an ponderin'. They's empty chairs around you and an empty table. You're puffin' at your pipe an' the smoke is risin' on the empty air. It's quiet in the shack, but outside the wind is whisperin' around the eaves, and you're listenin' to the coyotes wailin' their war song up on the benches——"

"An' the bullfrogs along the creek," the old-timer nodded. "They're worst. The quieter the night, the bigger the blasted chorus."

"Millions of 'em," said Windy. "Remindin' you that even the lowest of things that crawl an' the mangy coyotes in the barrens are with their own kind;

an' it comes to you that you're old, busted-down, an' alone. A bewhiskered image settin' in an empty hall; an' the old alarm clock on the shelf is tickin' you into the home stretch. But because mankind is cursed with imagination, old son, they's times, in them quiet hours whilst the bullfrogs whoop, that you ain't settin' alone. Your woman's there, like she used to be?"

"In the rocker by the fireplace," said the ancient one. "Knitting that a way an' nary a sound. Or Mattie. When she was jest a little gal. Playin' with her blocks."

"But when you rub yore eyes an' look again," said Windy, "they're gone. You set for a while an' try to dream again, hopin' they'll come back. But they don't come back, an' they're never comin' back. If they do, it's only a dream. The rocker's empty, an' them dusty blocks is still there where you hid 'em when Mattie growed up an' went away. So after listenin' for a spell longer to them voices of the lonely places, you crawl into yore blankets, blow out the light, an' turn yore face to the wall. Yeah, knowin' it ain't any hopeful to-morrow you'll wake up to, but just another day."

The ancient one knocked the ashes from his pipe and glowered upon Windy, his sullen eyes glistening. He refilled his pipe and clamped it between his teeth.

"You've done called 'em like they fell," he agreed. "You got more understandin' an' imagination than I give you credit for. How in blazes you was able to follow my trail that a way is something I ain't even surmisin'."

"Cinch," said Windy. "It don't call for no heavy mental effort. Folks is like sheep. Observe a couple of 'em an' you've seen 'em all. Yeah, when one of them woolly half-wits gets all snarled up in a bramble bush, what does he do? Blats an' bleats for help that ain't in sight. He knows better, but he's still hopeful. An' that's the way it goes."

"It ain't any bramble bush," averred the other. "It's one of them impenetrable forests. But since we're agreed I'm some bogged down, let's have it all in a bunch. Ain't there no way out?"

Windy shook his head, yawning.

"I'm through, huh?"

"Listen," said Windy. "Let's put it blunt an' brutal. The whys an' wherefores leadin' up to them lonely hours when the bullfrogs whoop is plain to the eye. You want to know how come you was headin' for the bramble bush all the while? I'll tell you, an' I ain't claimin' it hurts me worse than you. Just recall you not only asked for it, but insisted on it regardless."

"Shoot," challenged the ancient one. "An' don't pull yore punches no more. Whilst you're flittin' around the edges of what you aim to say, I'm aging fast."

"From the first," said Windy, "you been thinkin' of yourself entirely. One of them blasted egotists. It's a fatal error which has done tripped up good men in the past. Like Napoleon. An' Julius Cæsar."

"I ain't any Napoleon or Julius Cæsar," muttered the other. "Just a lowly maverick who's out of his depth."

"Cowboy or king," proclaimed Windy. "Lobo or lily of the field. It don't make no difference what a gent calls himself. The path of glory and the said trail of the lowly maverick both meet up at the grave. In yore own life an' yore lowly stampin' grounds you set up to be a kind of a Napoleon. You said to yore woman: 'We'll live in a shack. an' play 'em close, an' when the time comes we'll cash in.' But yore oncomplainin' woman, who might have lived like other folks instead of down in that blasted wilderness on Antone Creek, who meekly gave up neighbors an' friends an' all them things that women folks set store by just because the

great bewhiskered mogul said the word, she cashed in. She had all the grief, an' never got to sample the gravy."

"True," agreed the other, turning his face away. "All true."

"But even yore woman would have rested easy in her grave if you'd done right by her gal. Women folks is made that way. They'll suffer an' slave an' die just so their young ones have a chance. You done promised her you'd take care of Mattie, huh? She passed on cheerful, believin' them wilderness years wasn't spent in vain. But how did the great mogul live up to that faith an' trust? He says to Mattie: 'This shack was good enough for me an' maw. It's good enough for you. You don't need no pretty clothes, nor other young folks to play with, nor schoolin', nor none of them idle an' frivolous things. Just you stick around an' keep house for the old man, cookin' his vittles an' scrubbin' the floor, just like your maw.' Yeah, an' what happened? She went for a walk one day an' never come back. Took up with the first upstandin' lad that come into her life. It was her only chance at happiness, an' like a desperate gambler she took it. Shot the works on a single play. An' won. Am I callin' 'em right?"

"Like they fell," muttered the ancient one. "Looks worse when some one else deals 'em. But let's see the rest."

"They ain't but a few cards left," said Windy. "Read 'em an' weep. Yore woman stayed till her last chip was gone, an' then sat out. Yore gal knew it was a losin' game an' dragged her ante while she still had a few chips left, the same bein' her hopes an' ambitions an' a chance to live. An' did the great mogul learn a lesson from all this? No, by gravy! Sat back an' nourished a grudge because Mattie had done him dirt. Plumb soured because the upstandin' lad turned out to be a real gent with iron in him, able an' willin' to provide the gal with all the things she'd always missed. Didn't answer her letters, them thoughtful, kindly letters in which she took it for granted he'd be pleased to learn they was doin' well. No, sir, he never went to visit her nor took an interest in her young ones nor nothin'. Just sat back and nourished on his own cussedness. So six years ago, after clingin' to the idea that he was human long after most folks would have give up, she quit writin' an' called it a day."

"I wasn't as bad as that," protested the ancient one hoarsely. "Plumb onery an' cross-grained, wu'thless an' no-account, maybe. But you're overlookin' a bet right along. I set store by my gal Mattie——"

"In this vale of tears," said Windy ruthlessly, "talk is a low-priced commodity which can be had at a discount at any time. It's action which is the twenty-four-carat coin of the realm. Not what you thought, or said, or dreamed about, but the things you didn't do has sold Mattie on the theory that you didn't give a dang about her maw, nor her, nor her young ones, nor the whole blasted world. An' they ain't any argument about it. Facts is final. Which brings us to the last card in the onlovely layout. You crave to see it?"

"Let's have it," growled the ancient one, blinking through the curling smoke. "Too late now to complain about the joker."

"An' too late to call for a new deck," said Windy. "Yeah, the joker's wild. You know what your actions has done written into the record? You been thinkin' of yoreself from the first. Yore woman shaped her life accordin' to yore plans, an' died along the trail which you chose to take. Don't kid me, mister. More than once she said to you, hopeful: 'Listen. We got plenty. Let's take it easier an' live like other folks. I crave to neighbor a little over the back fence and raise me some

flowers. I want to make me some friends, an' join a sewing circle, an' live close enough to a school so Mattie'll have a chance.' But the bewhiskered mogul brushed them plaintive pleas aside, an' she died in harness. Mattie would have done likewise, except she took a chance, bet her stack on a single turn of the dice. An' this is the joker, old son. They was right. You was wrong. You wasn't buckin' yore woman's ideas, an' Mattie's. You was bucking life, an' the laws of life. Like every optimist who undertook that chore from the Garden of Eden down, you're licked. That's final. You spent yore best years hoarding shekels. Now you're old an' busted down. You can't enjoy it. Even Millie, who's young, don't need it. She an' her man could have used yore iron men when they was startin' out an' the trail led uphill. Now they're over the hump an' it's too late. Your woman could have enjoyed it. She's gone."

Windy yawned. "An' that's all they is to it, old son. They ain't any more. All yore life you've been blazin' a trail. All the while it's pointed in the same direction. For a spell you was runnin' double, till yore woman grew weary. Mattie detoured off to the left an' faded over the horizon. Now you're comin' into the home stretch alone. You got no friends, no folks, nothin' but yore blasted shekels. It was the trail you took. No detours for you, old son. Too late to turn back. All you can do is sit tight. Three-four years—maybe ten on account of you bein' onerier than most—then yore shack'll be empty. The bullfrogs will whoop undisturbed. Life an' the world'll roll on, not knowin' you're gone." Windy flicked the ashes from his cigarette and waved a languid hand. "An' now, after this plumb enjoyable conversation on trivial things, let's turn to something heavy. As man to man, is this weather goin' to be tough on the range, or ain't it?"

It was quiet in the big room. Certain cash customers had come and departed. Buzzardlike, under Flannigan's jaundiced eye, the lone insect circled and swooped. The sleeper snored on. Lonesome mopped his face thoughtfully with a huge bandanna, his mild gaze fixed on the ancient one.

The latter sat in silence for a space, staring at the floor. Then he bestirred himself, muttering in his beard. He knocked the ashes from his pipe, placed it in his pocket, and arose somewhat stiffly. In physique he was a stolid man, his heavily bearded features massive; and stolidly now he peered down at Windy.

"Reckon you're right," he muttered. "Been fightin' off them conclusions for quite a spell. Reckon I'll drag along. What charges you makin' for your noble card-readin', mister?"

"No charges," said Windy, his black eyes glittering. "Fact is, I'm in yore debt. Gorgin' on yore troubles this a way, an' tellin' you where to head in so frank an' earnest, I've done worked off considerable of a grouch. But don't you hurry away, old son. Now that I'm in my usual sunny an' cheerful mood, leave me tell you a thing or two about——"

"Excuse it." The ancient one's whiskers curled into the semblance of a sneer. "I don't want to hear about no silver linings an' them things that ain't as bad as they seem. Like you said a while ago, facts is final. Much obliged for the helping hand. Yeah, it's a nice day. Tough on the range, maybe. Adios."

CHAPTER IV.

A MESSAGE FROM MONTANA.

FOR a space, after the old-timer's shambling bulk had merged into the sweltering world beyond the distant door, Windy sat in an attitude suggesting thoughtful repose. He yawned,

scratched his pugnacious jaw, gazed at the ceiling, at the floor and about the vast room. Then, as though against his will, his glittering eye roved toward his partner, and discovered that worthy to be studying him with almost accusing intentness.

"Well," he defended himself, his mustache bristling. "He brought it on himself, didn't he? He didn't ask for it, he plumb insisted on it. Craved the works, an' I was polite enough to oblige. What did the maverick expect? I reckon he figgered I was going to pat him on the back, an' say: 'There, there, ol' son. Just you forget yore troubles. Smile brightly, an' the three of us cheerful hombres will gather around an' sing, "Hark, hark, the lark"!' " He snorted wrathfully. "If that bewhiskered monument was searchin' for grief, he shorely come to the right party to get service with a smile. We strive to please."

"Yeah; but, Windy," Lonesome pointed out, "when you see a feller out of his depth an' yellin' for help, it ain't the correct social etiquette to heave him an anchor. That rickety but hard-boiled wolf come projectin' around like we was his last bet, an' you made a tramp out of him. Admittin' that you wasn't in the proper mood at the minnit——"

"Bah!" said Windy, lowering his restless feet to the floor. "Let's drag, McQuirk. Set here much longer an' we'll grow roots. That elderly longhorn don't interest me none whatever. What have his troubles got to do with the march of world events? Let's travel."

Nevertheless, as they moved past the bar, Windy suddenly turned aside in response to a knowing leer from Flannigan.

"You lads done it to the king's taste," observed the latter. "He went away talkin' to himself."

"Who was that critter?" inquired Windy. "An' how did he get that way?"

" 'Lobo' Lorenz from Antone Creek. One hostile an' cross-grained maverick who comes out of his den maybe once in a blue moon. 'I'm lookin' for a couple of pilgrims named McQuirk an' DeLong,' he says. 'I crave some pearls of wisdom from gents who know what it's all about.' 'Over yonder they set,' I told him. 'Strength to your arm!' 'You mean to say,' he says, 'that them two gorillas draw that much water?' 'An' more,' I tell him. 'If they're in the proper mood, they'll give you an earful. Which same you can follow blind.' "

"H'm," said Windy. "An' when he left here just now, did you get any clew to his present mental condition, if any?"

"Out on his feet," said Flannigan, grinning. "Like a gent who'd acquired so much wisdom he'd sink to his hips in solid rock. 'You was right,' he says. 'Them mavericks backed my own surmises. I'll foller 'em,' he says, 'blind.' "

The partners moved out into the lifeless expanse that was the main street of Condon. Horses dozed at hitching rails. In the doorways of mercantile establishments along the way shirt-sleeved proprietors leaned, hopefully awaiting the usual cooling midafternoon breeze from the northeast. To the south, a lone horseman was fading into the shimmering vastness of the high desert.

Because the livery stable was on the west side of the blistering thoroughfare, its front was now shadowed. Here, on the sidewalk before the yawning door, were four rawhide-upholstered chairs in a row. Three of these were empty. The fourth sagged sharply beneath the bony contours of Lem, the proprietor, a gaunt person whose motionless cheek bulged with an enormous chew. Windy eased into a place beside him. Lonesome followed suit.

As friends of long standing, the trio eyed each other without comment.

"DeLong," said Lonesome, at length, "now that all our heavy business is transacted, an' you've done refreshed yoreself with them conversational gymnastics, what say we drift out to the ranch? I ain't the kind of a gent who would bruise nobody's tender sensibilities, but the cool of the evening is made to order for throwin' in a few of them post holes."

Windy's glittering gaze was fixed upon him unseeingly, like one engrossed in thought. Lonesome sighed and drew forth the makings.

Ben Hornaday, sheriff of Gilliam County, lumbered ponderously into Flannigan's across the street, emerged after a space, and following a circuitous route that took advantage of a certain areas of shade, drew near and slumped into the vacant chair at the left. He puffed loudly and mopped his rotund face with a huge bandanna.

"If I didn't know for sure that it'd ease up after sundown, with a full moon an' all the trimmings that makes a gent forget he ever felt like a roastin' ear," he observed, "I'd cash in an' quit. You lean an' hungry lads have got the bulge on an overstuffed gent like me. A while ago I heard a kind of a buzzin' sound. I figgered at first it was a blasted cricket. But you know what it was? It wasn't any cricket. Just the back of my neck sizzlin'." His keen eyes inspected the partners with a brief glance. He shifted his bulk, groaning, his gaze turned toward the south where the distant horseman moved, insectlike in the wavering dimensions of the open country. "I understand you optimists are lookin' for mortgage money."

Windy, contrary to his usual custom, said nothing. Whereupon Lonesome took upon himself the burden of replying.

"We was," he said. "We ain't any more. We discovered it was one of them useless pastimes. So as soon as Windy gets a holt of himself again, we'll slope out to the ranch an' forget large ideas. It kind of bore him down," he explained. "DeLong ain't used to havin' his eloquence discounted that a way. Them loan sharks wasn't impressed none whatever. They let him down so easy his teeth is still rattlin'."

Even his challenge was not sufficient to rouse Windy from his thoughtful reverie. His moody gaze was fixed on the brazen sky, where a high hawk wheeled.

"I got a thought or two along that line which will maybe better yore hands," said the sheriff. Lonesome shook his head warningly, but the bulky one paid no heed. "No use tryin' to extract coin from these ten-per-cent artists in town. Why don't you citizens amble out to the Bar Z? Colonel Horsfall has shipped out a lot of beef lately. He's well-heeled, knows you gents, an' if he's in the proper mood could probably be persuaded to fix you up. No harm tryin'."

To Lonesome's chagrin, Windy exhibited a faint spark of interest at this suggestion. He shifted his gaze to the peace officer, and scratched his lean jaw reflectively.

"Here's another," said the sheriff. "Lobo Lorenz was just in town. He's come an' gone. Too bad you mavericks didn't meet up with him whilst he was in the genial frame of mind that undoubtedly resulted from comin' out of his roost for his yearly visit to the metropolis. Maybe you don't know it, but that citizen's supposed to be rotten wealthy. Drop in on him on the way to the Bar Z."

Lonesome made no reply. He yawned deliberately, his tawny mustache quivering, and cast about for some subject of conversation that would swerve the bulky one from further helpful suggestions; but the sheriff persisted:

"If Lobo's got it, you might as well borrow some of his shekels an' put 'em to good use. I been worried some about that critter. Livin' alone on Antone Creek that a way. If he's got a barrel of money planted around the premises, some of these cutthroats are liable to work him over an' see how much he assays."

"Cutthroats, eh?" Lonesome followed this lead with simulated interest. "Bad hombres movin' in on us? Where from?"

"New Mexico. Texas," said the sheriff. "They just cleaned out a nest of highbinders down around the Pecos, an' I got information that some of them are headin' this a way. Known it for three-four weeks. I been lookin' strangers over an' puttin' em through a course of sprouts as to their invisible means of support. They's a feller been around town a couple of days, off an' on, an' I ain't got him cornered yet. Pock-marked citizen with a cleft lip."

"He was over to Flannigan's a minnit ago," said Lonesome. "Snorin' peaceful. He'd ought to be easy to round up an' question."

"I just come from Flannigan's," said the sheriff. "The critter's gone. Seems like them slippery gents is mind-readers. All I done was figger on givin' him the works, an' he fogged out of town pronto."

"McQuirk," said Windy, at this point. "I've done reached a conclusion. Release the anchor an' trail along if you got the strength."

"You critters goin' to the Bar Z?" queried the sheriff.

"To the Bar Z?" said Windy. "Not in this frying-pan weather, brother. Whereas that idea of puttin' it up to Colonel Horsfall has its points. After sundown, maybe."

"Where we goin'?" complained Lonescome, as they moved across the street. "I'll swear, DeLong, if you was this active diggin' post holes, we'd have everything south of the Snake River under fence."

"McQuirk," said Windy, by way of reply, pulling his hat lower over his eyes, "I've been thinkin' about that bewhiskered maverick. He haunts me. A feller of his disposition has got to have his back to the wall plenty before he'll come projectin' around lookin' for help. It's jolt enough to a lad that's sot in his ways, an' lived as long as he has, to find out he's been wrong all the while. It comes to me that I rode him too rough. It was O. K. to bring out them skeletons of the past an' make 'em rattle, an' also to blast out the solid ground from under his feet. But to sell him on the theory that the future don't hold no hope whatsoever was stealin' his last crust, in a manner of speaking. It's some painful to admit, but in the enthusiasm of the minnit I done over-reached myself. Result is, my conscience is throwin' handsprings an' yellin' for action."

"Those are noble sentiments," Lonesome approved. "But what's to be done about it? He's gone back to his roost. Too late now to run him down an' undertake to explain that you was talkin' through yore pearl-gray hat, it ain't as bad as it seems, an' there's still a gleam through the mist. To be more pointed an' specific, where we headed for right at the minnit?"

"To the depot," said Windy. "Where I need the benefit of yore alleged mighty intellect to help me frame up a telegram."

"A telegram! To whom?"

"To his gal in Montana," said Windy. "Just to check up on the status quo, as the legal sharps say. It's six years since he's heard from her, which is quite a spell in these times."

"Son of a gun, DeLong," Lonesome accused. "You shorely got a craving to be the boss bull in somtbody's china shop. Ain't you had yore fill yet of hornin' into other folks' affairs?"

"We've done horned in already," Windy pointed out. "Too late now to back away watchful. It's O. K. to bust up the gent's crockery. It ain't right to leave him without a pot to cook in."

"And another thing," said Lonesome, his mild eyes twinkling. "Indigent as we are, how come you figger it's good business to spend our substance for telegrams in which they's no percentage for us? Old age an' creakin' bones is just around the corner, don't forget."

"Cinch," said Windy. "We'll charge it off to pastime. We'd spend more than that ante battlin' for hickeys over to Flannigan's."

In the dusty depot, which provided passenger, freight, express, and telegraphic service for a segment of the high country approximately equal in area to the State of Delaware, Windy seized upon telegraph forms and the pair proceeded to the unaccustomed business of setting down their thoughts in written form. For Windy particularly, whose self-expression usually required much latitude, it was a task of no mean proportions.

Nevertheless, after much perspiring labor and argument, they reached an agreement on a brief message, which read:

MRS. MATTIE PARSONS,
Booth City, Montana.

Your dad, being old, busted down and lonely, is looking for a home. If interested in providing beans and a bunk wire

WINDY DELONG.

"You see, McQuirk," Windy explained, "Lobo being well-heeled, ain't cravin' them creature comforts. What he yearns for is something his shekels can't buy. The gal likewise being prosperous has shorely got a spare room for him an' a place at the table. The fact that she kept writin' to him hopeful all them years shows that blood's thicker than water an' she cottons to the cross-grained an' bewhiskered ol' battle-ax regardless. If she figgers he needs her she'll tell him to come a-runnin'. If he figgers she wants him—in spite of his oneriness of the past—he'll make dust pronto toward all they is left in life that looks like home. Listens good, huh?"

"Give it a whirl," Lonesome voted. "The worst she can do is politely tell you to go to blazes and how come you got such an interest in family politics?"

"Dollar forty," said the loquacious freight, express, and telegraph agent, an alert person between whom and Windy had long existed a species of feud. He reread the missive with interest. "Mattie Parsons, huh? Don't seem to remember the name. She used to live around here?"

"Brother," said Windy, his mustache bristling as he produced his wallet, "don't you throw no fancy kinks in yore alleged mental machinery by tryin' to figger that out. To ease yore mind, if any, I'll let you in on a secret. That's a code to my Montana bootlegger. The last mountain dew he sent me didn't have no more kick than sulphuric acid, an' I'm hollerin' my head off."

"So?" said the other. "You'd ought to put a muzzle on this critter, McQuirk. If he was to start bitin' folks in this heat, there'd be heck to pay."

"Send that off pronto, mister," Windy directed, with a regal gesture. "When the answer comes, hot-foot it around town to wherever we happen to be takin' our royal ease. Yore snappy service is much appreciated. Curb your conversational instincts, watch yore step, speak politely to yore superiors, an' what a railroad president you'll make some day!"

"Let's go," Lonesome cut in. "What ails you, DeLong? You couldn't buy a postage stamp without startin' a riot."

"That's where he got his reputation as a fighting man," suggested the agent. "Lickin' postage stamps. Wasn't that a hot one? An' it come to me just like that!"

"It would," Windy agreed, turning away. "When you get an idea, folks can hear it rattlin' for miles around. Now, don't forget, buddy. You're a workin' man, not a vodville entertainer. Makes the wires smoke. When the answer comes, if any, let's have it pronto. And don't overburden yore active mind tryin' to figger what it's all about. The designs follered by me an' McQuirk is too deep for gents of yore caliber to grasp."

On the main street they came, by chance, upon two wranglers from the Bar Z. These energetic youths, having purchased the supplies for which they had been sent to the metropolis, were prepared to while away a few hours of leisure before returning to the cattle empire south of Antone Creek. The quartet accordingly repaired to Flannigan's and foregathered about a green-topped table for a tilt with Lady Luck.

At this session, two developments bearing on Windy's financial progress unfolded. Colonel Horsfall, the wranglers informed the partners, was away on a trip to Harney Valley and would not return for another week. The cattle baron's absence checkmated the sheriff's suggestion that mortgage money could be secured from that source. Counterbalancing this news, which Windy received with calmness, was the fact that the partners, being adept in the ancient American pastime, relieved their opponents of worldly wealth to the tune of fourteen dollars, net.

"This, McQuirk," said Windy with rising good spirits, as they divided the spoils. "is my idea of heavy business. We've combed enough lucre from these optimists to pay for the said wire to Montana, with a little edge for the old-age fund. Now if the answer we get will set our bewhiskered playmate up on his feet, it's liable to be a fine large day in spite of ourselves."

"An' if you penny-ante whirlwinds will drop in at Bar Z bunk house some large evening," challenged one of the disgruntled losers, "we'll shorely take you to a cleanin'. Let's go, cowboy, before these dime-extractors have our eye teeth."

"We'll do it," Windy promised, waving them away. "Whereas takin' you Bar Z savages on in yore own billiwack is shorely beardin' the said lions in their dens, we'll give you a chance to win back yore hard-earned savings. To-night, maybe."

"That's a bet, mister. We'll be lookin' for you, an' you'll be some embarrassed ridin' home. A full moon that a way an' no shirts to yore backs."

It was now late afternoon. As the partners leaned on the bar, studying their reflections in the beveled mirror with languid disinterest, the telegraph agent strode briskly in from the street, a telegram in his hand.

"From your bootlegger, DeLong," he announced. "More of that old soldiers' reunion code. Appreciating your shrinking and sensitive nature, I didn't even read it as it come over the wire. Just took it down an' come a-runnin'. To explain my snappy service, I'll tell you it come collect. Fork over a dollar sixty and I'll leave you look at it."

"Wait," said Windy. "Don't hurry away. Virtue has got to be rewarded. Flannigan, give the gent a slug of sas'p'rella."

Spreading the missive on the bar. the partners read:

WINDY DELONG,
Condon, Oregon.

We've lost all our money and the eight of us are living in a shack, but there's always room for one more. Tell dad there's always a bunk and beans waiting for him here.

MATTIE PARSONS.

The partners turned from contemplation of this message to study each other. Windy's mustache bristled into a rare and engaging grin. Lonesome's mild eyes lighted. Both chuckled in unison.

"McQuirk," said Windy, "if that ain't a break for a weary ol' lobo, I ain't entitled to credit. In the past six years, much water has flowed under the bridge. Instead of bein' prosperous that a way, his gal an' her numerous progeny is down an' out. Instead of bein' useless an' not needed in the scheme of things, he'll descend on 'em like a jinglin' Christmas tree. His life ain't wasted. He comes into the home stretch like a grinnin' Santa Claus, givin' em a helpin' hand to repay 'em for them weary years. We'll make dust out to Antone Creek just for the pleasure of watchin' his whiskers quiver when we show him the glory trail."

"Not on an empty stummick," Lonesome demurred. "Them shades of night is falling an' it's a long ways to Antone Creek. We most certainly got to eat first."

"The nose-bags, an' then we'll travel," said Windy. "We don't want to lose no time. It comes to me that I don't like the way that alfalfa-trimmed pilgrim staggered away when I was done stretchin' his hide on the fence. It's been bearin' me down all afternoon. Only a couple of times in my life I've seen gents who'd given up hope that a way. Each time, something painful to contemplate busted loose."

"All of which," Lonesome pointed out, as they strode toward the Condon Chuckwagon, "is leadin' us a long ways afield from yore mortgage money, DeLong. But I ain't makin' a point of it. I'm shorely pleased that yore energies have been turned into other fields of endeavor. If I was just onery an' back-bitin' enough——"

"That's a plenty," said Windy. "Mention them post holes just once more an' a massacre commences. This here's just a side trail from the main drag. After I've done squared myself for blastin' Lobo's hopes of the hereafter, we'll turn our attention to heftier matters."

CHAPTER V.

THE DEN OF THE WOLF.

THE witchery of night in the high country was upon the land as the partners rode south from Condon. Heat waves and sweltering sky had passed. A mellow warmth still radiated from rim rock and crumbling slope, but already a vague nocturnal breeze was whispering in the sage, bearing on its cooling breath a hint of higher, cleaner levels and eternal snow. Overhead the jeweled sky arched, its splendor dimmed to the eastward by the rising glory of a summer moon.

Both, through psychological factors typical of an energetic breed, were in high, good spirits. Windy's mustache bristled with the complacence of one whose conscience, lately clamoring and hostile, was now soothed by the knowledge that action was forthcoming. They were heading for Antone Creek, where their bewhiskered protégé was doubtless sitting alone among the ruins of his dreams, facing ultimate truths which had been so ruthlessly pointed out. In imagination, Windy was picturing the light that would flame in the ancient one's sullen eyes as he grasped the purport of the message from Montana, and its promise. He, Windy, had carelessly blasted the other's hopes of the hereafter. As casually he would extend a helping hand, lift him from his bog of futility and despair; and this excursion into human motives, emotions, and dreams, was sufficient, of itself, to make up the fabric of a fine large evening.

Lonesome's genial mood was founded on more practical facts. Their present expedition had served to side-track Windy from his behemoth idea concerning mortgage money, future riches, and a nebulous cattle empire.

From past experience, Lonesome was sure that through the enterprise at hand, which chance had tossed in their

path, his energetic partner would emerge unscathed from his imaginative gymnastics and again, in a manner of speaking, have his feet on the ground. Also, they were moving through a world that was beautiful, and the night was but a pup. The wind was keen against their faces as they rode. They were astride good horses. Good health and robust cheer rode with them in the saddle. They were heading for Antone Creek, to extend a helping hand to an ancient and embittered old-timer, who, having much gold and being still penniless, was limping into the home stretch, in spirit and in body alone.

Thus they turned aside from a chaos of pinnacle, mesa, and whispering sage that was weirdly and strangely beautiful beneath the high moon, and so into a gloomy canyon where the rocky trail paralleled a sullen creek that muttered among great, glistening boulders.

The partners had ridden many trails of the high desert, surrounded by bleak ridges, wind-swept crags, or the unutterable desolation of lava fields. Because they themselves were products of a harsh environment, their eyes were accustomed to savage dimensions, their senses attuned to a bleakness and vastness that was familiar and accepted. Yet moment by moment, as they penetrated this gorge, the sound of their progress raising up grudging echoes from the opposite wall, it was as though they were withdrawing from a known and accustomed world into a species of solitude that was alien to life.

There was no vegetation here, save tough, reedlike grasses that fringed the creek bed. The crests of the barren ramparts loomed in jumbled outline against the sky, the mighty walls scored with black splashes of shadow. No sound was abroad save the ring of steel on stone as their mounts moved forward, the muttering of the dark water in the depths, and a faint chorus of bullfrogs brought down with the sighing wind; and these insignificant echoes served but to exaggerate the gloom of the environs.

"McQuirk," averred Windy, twisting in his saddle to peer at his partner, "this layout is some depressin'. With the whole world to choose from, they's something wrong with a critter who'll pick such a roost as a steady diet. It ain't any wonder his woman passed out on him an' his gal made a run for it. Two weeks would give me the screamin' willies, an' to figger that Lobo hombre sat tight here for forty years!"

"No accountin' for some gent's tastes," Lonesome agreed. "Whereas he may have a layout that's easy to look at, once you get inside. This hole-in-the-wall country is sometimes plumb surprisin'."

But when they had rounded a great shoulder of dark basalt and "Lobo's Canyon" lay before them, the partners were appalled anew by the meagerness of the ancient one's holdings.

Here the walls had merely retreated, leaving a rocky flat some acres in extent. At one time, it was apparent, this flat had been under cultivation. It had been leveled, and heaps of whitened boulders were evidence of laborious efforts to make hostile soil tillable. The contours of an ancient high-line ditch could be seen beneath the northern wall, obviously used for irrigation purposes years before. But the ditch was dry now, its broken walls overgrown with hardy vegetation. Giant mullen stood at attention in the barren fields, and tumbleweeds massed against sagging fences long since fallen into disrepair. For a decade or more, it seemed, nothing had been done toward the upkeep of the premises; and all about were signs of the inexorable toll of time and decay.

At the farther end of the flat, where the ramparts of the blind canyon converged to form an unbroken front, was

a huddle of ancient buildings. There was a squat cabin built so close against the sheer cliff that its rear wall seemed to be the living rock of the rampart itself; a dilapidated barn, and a sagging corral whose stout palings were broken and fallen. In front of the cabin and perhaps forty steps down a gentle slope from the weather-beaten door, was a great, deep pool, doubtless fed by hidden springs, which was the source of the creek. From the tule-fringed edges of this pool, and along the length of the lethargic stream in the flat, a hoarse chorus of bullfrogs rose through the whispering quiet.

At first glance, as they moved forth from the gorge, the canyon appeared to be deserted and utterly devoid of life, an ancient homestead long since abandoned to the solitude of the wild. But a feeble grow illumined a small window of the cabin. At their right, a lone horse leaped away, snorting, and paused to stand, statuesque, upflung head turned toward them.

"There's Lobo's critter," Windy stated the obvious, "runnin' loose."

The bullfrog chorus quieted as they skirted creek and pool. Paralleling their line of march, the croaking of hundreds was reduced to scores and finally to a scattering handful. One bold sentinel remained, his raucous challenge rising from the farther reeds; then this sound, too, ceased, and the resultant silence seemed the more profound.

At the edge of the pool Windy drew rein and looked about him, pulling his hat lower over his eyes. His glittering gaze roved over the flat, studied the cabin and ancient corral, turned to the dark water at his feet. Lonesome, too, looked down and noted with an odd shock of surprise that the pool was not shallow, as it had first appeared, but deep and crystal-clear. There was something sinister yet fascinating about those shadowed depths. Pale streamers of moonlight, angling downward, played upon vague, descending contours, fragments of rock that were not worn smooth by erosion, but were sharp-edged and jagged, and so into still more remote deeps choked in inky blackness.

"You know, McQuirk," Windy spoke in a whisper as he leaned on the pommel and squinted across the flat, "they's a point about this business that's got me buffaloed. Lookin' at this disreput'ble layout, which wouldn't support more than a dozen beef cows an' maybe a couple of shotes, makes me curious as to how ol' Lobo ever amassed the filthy lucre which he claims he's got salted away. They ain't any grazin' land hereabouts. He shorely didn't drag down any heavy profits raisin' garden truck. Question is——"

"Listen," Lonesome interposed. "Let's do our stuff an' drag out of here. I was feelin' spry as a cricket before we come into this blind alley. Now I'm aging fast. They's something about this depressin' layout that makes me feel plumb rickety an' down in the mouth. It's nothin' to us how he got his wealth. Prob'ly on account of his grasping nature, everything he took in was clear profit. Let's pat him on the back an' travel."

Windy nodded abstractedly, and they turned toward the cabin. They were a little surprised that the ancient one had not come forth to greet them, for the noise of their arrival must have been plain in the ghostly canyon. The presence of the saddle horse and the light in the window was evidence enough that he was at home. Yet when they dismounted and knocked at the door, the sound reëchoed hollowly in the interior, and no footsteps advanced toward them.

"By gravy, McQuirk!" said Windy, peering at his partner, "you reckon something's happened to the critter? It

don't look so good. His hoss runnin' loose. Not payin' any attention when folks ride in on him this a way, an' him not used to neighborin'. Let's bust in an' give things the once-over."

He accordingly laid hold on the latch. The heavy door swung in. Together they stepped inside and paused on the threshold.

At first glance, there appeared to be nothing unusual in the scene—a large, gloomy, meagerly furnished cabin, and the owner thereof seated at the table, beneath the light of a bracket lamp, shaggy head resting on pillowed arms, asleep. Yet, as they drew nearer and studied the sleeper, taking note of his appearance and pose, the significance of the disposition of furniture in the room, and certain objects on the table at his elbow, they knew themselves to be in the presence of drama. A picture was before them, a story as plain to the eye as though its elements of pathos and tragedy had unfolded detail by detail upon a silvered screen; and Fate, they knew, had ushered them upon the scene just prior to the ringing down of the curtain on the last act.

Lobo, slumped at the table, breathing heavily, was not dressed in faded overalls curiously held together with twisted haywire, nor in the faded hickory shirt in which they had seen him in Condon. He was clad in what was obviously his Sunday best—a suit of black, decorous broadcloth in which his broad shoulders bulged. It was of ancient vintage, yet revealed little signs of wear, indicating that rare indeed had been the occasions when he had decked himself in such unaccustomed glory. A stiffly dignified collar enclosed his corded neck, and his broad, hairy wrists and hamlike hands were of dark mahogany texture by contrast to the whiteness of gleaming cuffs.

There was something incongruous in his appearance, yet nothing remotely approaching the ludicrous. Thus men of the high country decked themselves when about to embark upon a long journey. That Lobo was contemplating such a journey was plain; for reposing on the table, near his right hand, was a heavy, long-barreled, single-action, .45 Colt.

Also near his right hand was a gallon demijohn. Beside it was a tin cup in which were dregs of amber liquid. Lobo's arms rested upon a sheet of writing paper and his thick fingers still grasped a stub of pencil. Other sheets of paper scattered about the table revealed false starts made in the unaccustomed business of setting down his thoughts in written form. For this colossal task, it was apparent, he had fortified himself from the demijohn; and under the mellowing influence of the amber liquid, or from sheer weariness of heart, had fallen asleep before his work was done.

From contemplation of this evidence, the partners eyed each other somewhat furtively, then peered about the room. The doorway through which they had entered faced south. The table beneath the bracket lamp at which the ancient one huddled was to the east. North was the kitchen area, with a rusty stove in the corner and a high cupboard loaded with cooking utensils against the wall. Opposite the sleeper was a stone fireplace with a broad, worn hearth. No fire was laid in this fireplace. It was empty and cold. But a rocker and footstool were drawn up beside it. A basket overflowing with knitting paraphernalia was near by. Across the hearth was a heap of childish blocks, and a rag doll with an arm missing.

"McQuirk——" Windy spoke in a whisper, though both knew that the heavy sleep of the ancient one could not easily be disturbed. "Looks like for this lowly citizen the said eleventh hour struck dang' near an hour ago. We stumbled in here just in time. He

ain't any drinkin' man, or he'd have known his limits. Lucky he took one snort too many whilst he was thinkin' it over, or we'd have been too late. Question is, what's he writin'?"

"Let's give it a look," returned Lonesome. "I've never yet been a party to gougin' so deep into a gent's personal affairs, but since we've done rushed in where angels fear to tread, let's go the limit."

They accordingly moved up beside the sleeper. Gently raising his arms, they drew forth the writing paper. There were several penciled pages. Discarded sheets, upon which false starts had been made, contained scrawling lines that were wavering and shaken. Because his hand had been trembling, no doubt, these first attempts were all but illegible. The final missive had been laboriously printed.

It was a letter to his daughter, Mattie. While composing it, he had drunk deeply. But, as they read, the partners knew how deeply he had drunk of another and invisible cup, draining its bitter dregs.

DEAR MATTIE: I aim to write a few lines to you and put them in an envelope and leave it beside me. Then I'll write me another note to folks that find me, telling them to mail it to you after they've buried me here on the homestead. I don't want to cause you no trouble, Mattie. I wouldn't even bother you with this letter except they's a few things I crave to let you know.

I talked to a couple sharps up in Condon to-day. Young fellers compared to me, but old enough to know what it's all about. Ace-high lads who talk straight and who you can follow blind. I run to them like a scairt jack rabbit, hopin' the conclusions I'd come to was wrong. But they told me where to head in pronto, and now I know where I'm at.

Fact is, Mattie, I've been kind of blind all these years. And sot in my ways. Like that feller with the muckrake in "Pilgrim's Progress" that maw used to read to you. You remember that hombre was bent over all the while, working like a beaver with his eyes on the ground, so danged busy with his muckrakin' that he couldn't see the crown of glory being offered to him? Well, that's me. When yore maw passed out on me it was considerable of a jolt, but I dug in and worked harder than ever. Then you went, which plumb ruined me for a spell, but I spit on my hands and took another firm holt on the muckrake.

Now I'm through, Mattie. I've done grown old. An' tired. But now that I've cast my muckrake to one side an' straightened up, that said crown of glory ain't there no more. They's nothing at all but the gold I dug out of the blasted muck.

An' what does it amount to? When you was a little gal, Mattie, I showed you some gold I'd pounded out in the mortar, an' you said: "My, that's pretty, yellow rock!" I laughed at the time, but I ain't laughin' now. I'd always figgered the blasted gold could buy back everything I'd missed in life. But it can't bring yore maw back. It can't bring you back, or make you believe yore old dad ever set store by you. It can't help you, nor your young ones, nor yore upstandin' man, because you don't need help. It can't buy me friends, nor a chance to live my life over, nor no crown of glory. Plumb useless that a way. It's only yellow rock. Nothin' more——

It was at this point that the writing of the missive had ceased. To fortify himself against the final paragraph of farewell, no doubt, the ancient one had turned again to the demijohn; and, groping for words in his last extremity, had thus fallen asleep.

The partners, in their life span, had traveled far and seen much. Lurid years of harsh experience with men and motives had sharpened rather than blunted their perceptions, made their inner emotional reactions more vivid. They, too, knew the meaning of scars; and as they pondered the laboriously written missive, reading into it the unspoken record of profitless ambition and frustrated dream, they were cut to the heart. Grimly, through his life, the ancient one had followed his stubborn way. Grimly he had faced ultimate facts, as he had here come to the end of his trail, and bowed to the decree.

No appeal had been made for pity in the missive. He had not railed at

fate or circumstance. Yet the partners knew that the conclusions contained therein had been torn, as it were, from the very fabric of his soul. For he was a stubborn and unyielding man. Grimly, through his life, he had hewed to the line, clinging to the stubborn belief that in the end his gold would compensate for the futility and heart-break of barren years. Grimly, in this rendezvous with death, he had faced ultimate facts that had utterly reversed his accepted scheme of existence. His life was lived; his loved ones gone. The gold was yellow rock, nothing more.

Straightening up from their study of the printed page, the partners eyed each other with a somewhat furtive and abashed air, like those who have peered brazenly into a shrine.

"H'm," said Windy, at length. "An' this is the lowly pilgrim that I done took pleasure in scalpin' just to make a Roman holiday! Come runnin' to us like a scairt jack rabbit, by gravy, hopin' he was mistaken, an' I done sold him on the theory it was final! Well, McQuirk, they's something before us that's got the earmarks of a noble deed. It's lucky that final slug of mountain dew laid him out cold or he'd be twanging a harp right this minnit. We got to straighten out this well-meanin' but hard-boiled citizen an' ease him into the home stretch."

"Yeah, but how?" questioned Lonesome. "Accordin' to his lights, they's no way out of this jack pot."

"They is," said Windy. "He's been overlookin' a bet right along. Which is natural enough, on account of him havin' his mind on filthy lucre all his life. He's attached too danged much importance to the buying power of his shekels. He thinks he's hard-boiled, but the fact is the critter's humble at heart. He figgered he wouldn't be welcome at Mattie's unless he paid his way. It ain't ever occurred to him that she'd be glad to see him no matter how he come slopin' home. He could come in rags an' limpin'. Or he could roll down the pike in a golden chariot. An' it likewise don't make no difference how much worldly goods she's got at the time. She could be the leader of the village four hundred, or her and her man an' her young ones could be livin' in a shack. The beans an' bunk has always been waitin'."

"Correct," agreed Lonesome, nodding. "Fact is, DeLong," he continued with mounting enthusiasm, "this said wire from Mattie is the precise break the pore maverick has craved all the while. If you can sell him on the theory that Mattie wants him to come regardless, an' likewise inform him that she an' her family is down an' out, it'll be like givin' a sinner the hope of salvation. He's not only found understandin' an' so forth, which he's never had, but his shekels is also useful. It'd be the very thing he's dreamt about—marchin' home to help Mattie, leadin' a column of iron men! But how you goin' to put this across, Windy? If we set around an' wait till he's shook off the grip of demon rum, he'll be some morose an' suspicious. Up to Flannigan's was the time to point out the glory trail. To get by with it now, when he's done made up his mind this a way, will shorely call for that said finesse."

"Correct," agreed Windy. "An' ain't it a break that ol' DeLong is on the job! I got the play all figgered. No use to use persuasion on him when he wakes up, he'll be that bleary-eyed an' suspicious. Fact is, we got to stay in the background, an' he's never to suspect that we had anything to do with puttin' him right. So we'll just take his letter, where he left off, an' write in a message from Mattie. Just like she'd leaned over his shoulder an' wrote it whilst he slept."

"A message from Mattie?" objected

Lonesome. "That wouldn't get to first base. He knows she's all of eight hundred miles away."

"Yeah, but look, Lonesome," Windy pointed out. "It'll be dang' near midnight, probably, before he wakes up. Cold an' still here in the shack, an' the bullfrogs whoopin' out in the tules, an' the coyotes doin' their war dance way up yonder in the moonlight as usual. He's never felt so old an' busted down an' low. He looks at his demijohn an' contemplates his six-shooter an' recalls they's work to be done. So he takes up his pencil an' looks at his letter—an' finds they's something written in where they was nothin' written before. He rubs his eyes an' looks again. It's there, by gravy! A line or two from Mattie tellin' him something he's craved an' prayed for. He runs heavy to imagination, you savvy. His woman's sat in that empty rocker yonder on more than one of them long evenings. An' Mattie playin' with her blocks. He don't know how to explain this message that's been wrote in. He don't have to, on account of him yearnin' to believe. They's cobwebs in his mind, anyway, on account of the hooch. Maybe her spirit come to him acrost the mountains beggin' him to come slopin' home. It'll start him thinkin' an' hopin'; an' the upshot of it'll be that he'll tear up that letter, an' start for Booth City."

"Sounds reasonable, at that," Lonesome ruminated, tugging at his drooping mustache. "When a feller's in the shape he's in, all you got to do is plant the said seed of hope in his heart an' it'll grow like a mushroom. They ain't any hombre so hard-boiled an' desperate that he don't believe, clean up to the last minnit, that maybe the rope'll break an' he won't be hung. He won't puzzle too long over how come he got the message. The idea's the thing. Yeah, give it a whirl, DeLong. I reckon you also have the said missive all figgered?"

"Which I have," said Windy. "Short an' sweet that a way."

Stooping beside the sleeper, he took the pencil from the gnarled, lifeless fingers and printed the words:

> DAD: Come home. We haven't much to offer you, on account of losing everything we had in the hard times here, but it's home as long as you want to stay. Through all these years I've been lonesome to see you. Come quickly, dad. MATTIE.

"An' that's that," said Windy, straightening up with an appearance of brusqueness. He replaced the pencil in the sleeper's hand, carefully arranged the letter as he had found it. He took up the six-shooter, broke it, emptied the shells into his pocket, and replaced the weapon in its exact former position. "Just to copper our bets," he told his partner, his mustache bristling into a grin. "We don't want him to do nothin' rash before he has time to think. Let's go, McQuirk."

They stepped forth into vivid moonlight that lay upon a brooding world. The bullfrog chorus rose in a harsh crescendo through the ancient hush. Far away on a silvered pinnacle, the bell-like wail of a lone coyote ululated down as from the glittering stars. Below the threshold, Lonesome paused and eyed his partner doubtfully.

"'Sall right," Windy soothed. "We won't leave it all to chance. The night is but a pup. We'll amble over to the Bar Z an' teach them optimistic savages the rudiments of poker. On the way back to town we'll drop in casual an' see how our noble activities have done panned out."

CHAPTER VI.

A GENIAL CUTTHROAT.

MIDNIGHT had come and gone when the partners rode back from the Bar Z, headed north. Side by side their splendid horses undulated in flight, the sound of their progress ring-

ing across the ghostly solitude. The moon was in the high zenith now. Pinnacle and mesa drifting by were bathed as in a kind of silver dawn; they sat the saddle in silence, sombreros pulled low over their eyes; and their gaze rested unseeingly on the trail ahead where their shadows advanced and retreated, swelled and diminished, according to the uneven contour of the way.

Poker, for the partners, was more than a game of wits, an opportunity for gregarious good-fellowship. The great American pastime was, philosophically, a replica of life. One dealt, discarded, drew, placed his bets, and ran his bluffs as in life. One held a hand considered to be strong, perhaps invincible, and found himself annihilated in the showdown. A lowly pair, properly played, might sweep a full house from the field. And beyond all skill or bluffs or run of cards, standing unseen at the player's shoulder, was the alluring, tantalizing, mocking presence of Lady Luck. Despite the best-laid schemes and most finished play, it was her dainty but imperious gesture that called the turn. It was only in the final showdown that gains or losses could be appraised; and also, as in life, it was then too late to change the record.

Invariably, from such a session as the late imbroglio staged in the smoke-blackened walls of the Bar Z bunk house, Windy emerged with senses more keenly attuned to the shifting forces that moved as invisible currents beneath the apparently sluggish surface of life. The truth was more firmly driven home that in life, as in cards, Lady Luck held the final vote. A case in point had been the results of the evening's play. It had been a desperate and "cutthroat" game, judged by bunkhouse standards. The partners, in the final analysis, had lost nothing. They had, in their own phrasing, "broke even." Yet up to the very last deal, they had been heavy winners. To give their disgruntled opponents a chance to recoup, they had carelessly wagered their entire winnings on a single draw —and lost. This event, all had grinningly agreed, left each faction richer only by the experience; and the partners had ridden away with genial threats pertaining to the next future struggle.

Yet because there remained, in the background of his mind, the knowledge that out in the sinister quiet of the canyon of Antone Creek a certain old-timer would presently waken to face his last deal, Windy, applying the lesson just reaffirmed, was troubled by a vague shadow of a thought that verged on a premonition. He and Lonesome, with heavy winnings before them and the game almost finished, had lost all. Instead of staggering triumphantly away, burdened with spoils, they were retreating empty-handed. Was it possible that the embittered Lobo, awakening to realizations that were sweeter than life, might yet be cheated of his last pitiful happiness?

"Let's ramble along, McQuirk," Windy announced restively. "They's unfinished business down on Antone Creek. It comes to me that we should have stuck around an' seen to it that Lobo was started for Montana. Managin' it the way we done left entirely too much to luck. We sure ain't performed accordin' to Hoyle till that lowly maverick's actually headed for home."

"Correct," assented Lonesome. "I've been thinkin' the same thing. It looked O. K. at the time, leavin' him the dope we got from his gal, an' lettin' him reach his own conclusions. But we'd ought to have stayed on the job an' personally escorted him over the hump. Tough break if they was a slip-up now."

Thus they accelerated their pace, and presently were again surrounded by the

sinister, moon-bathed chaos that stood guard on Antone Creek.

There was no wind now in the canyon. Time and life seemed suspended. Through nightmare dimensions that were boldly etched and splashed with shadow they moved; and the sound of steel on stone sent alien echoes shuttling back from towering wall and gloomy ravine. They rode slowly, because of the roughness of the trail, and in silence. The quiet and savagery of the environment wrought upon their mood. Each found himself alert, nerves tingling. Each peered forth unwinkingly into the wavering vistas ahead, twisted in the saddle to look back.

Their gaze meeting beneath their shadowed sombreros, each grinned sheepishly and without mirth.

"Ghosts is ridin' in the brakes tonight, McQuirk," muttered Windy. "You reckon ol' Lobo's passed out?"

"Dunno," returned Lonesome. "Let's speed up an' find out. This layout makes me feel like I was a long ways from home."

But they did not speed up. The gorge had swung south at this point. In the bend of the wall, the trail was choked in shadow; and in this shadow, Windy pulled up suddenly, with a gesture that halted Lonesome in his tracks. Both froze into immobility. Their mounts stood, statuesque.

After a long moment during which the very rocks seemed to be holding their breath, Lonesome peered questioningly at his partner.

"Let's unlimber our artillery, McQuirk," whispered Windy, twisting to fumble with his saddlebags.

With a celerity suggesting that he, too, had been battling the same impulse, Lonesome drew forth cartridge belt and holster and strapped them on.

"What'd you see?" he demanded. "Hear something?"

"It's what I didn't hear that's makin' my hackles r'ar up," returned Windy. "Lobo's roost is just around the corner, McQuirk. But where are them blasted bullfrogs?"

It was true. Though they listened intently, they could hear nothing but the breathing of their mounts and the sullen mutter of the creek. The raucous chorus was stilled; and they knew now that this significant fact had registered insistently upon their subconscious minds from the first.

"Maybe Lobo's prowlin' around," Lonesome suggested. "Snapped out of it that a way——"

"Look!" Windy whispered, pointing.

A steep upgrade led around a high shoulder of basalt guarding the entrance to Lobo's canyon. From where they stood in the shadow, the moon was just around the corner; but sharply etched against its glowing aura and the glittering sky they saw a segment of the black silhouette of wall in motion. The head and shoulders of a man, and a high-crowned sombrero, drew back slowly and out of sight.

"H'm," said Lonesome, after a long moment. "It ain't ghosts that ridin' the brakes, DeLong. It ain't ol Lobo. Question is, who is that critter?"

"Let's go," said Windy. "How come this hole in the wall got so danged populous? We'll find out pronto. We'll ride up casual, McQuirk. But get set as we make the corner. His actions is some suspicious."

The knowledge that a creature of flesh and blood was before them swept away vague apprehensions born of their ghostly environment. They rode up the long slope with hands light on the rein; and old coördinations awakening from lurid years of the past caused them to sit poised in the saddle, their gun hands free.

But they encountered neither challenge nor ambush. They heard the mysterious one coming. He was

mounted now, the sound of his progress preceding him before he came into view. He appeared in silhouette against the sky, rode casually down toward them, whistling.

His whistling ceased as they mounted through the shadow. He pulled up in simulated surprise, a fact that caused the partners to be the more on guard. Had they not seen him spying upon them from the high ridge, it might have appeared that he was mildly astonished at thus encountering other wayfarers on a lonely trail. As they drew near he threw a leg over the pommel, reached for the makings. and slumped restfully, like one who purposes to make talk.

He was a lean-jawed youth, his features bold, reckless, and somewhat dissipated. A heavy-calibered weapon was strapped low on his thigh. Certain details of equipment—his "center-fire" rig, the flair of his sombrero—told the partners that he was not of the region. A seasoned product of the range, no doubt, but not the Oregon range. His narrowed gaze swept them in an appraisal as swift and keen as their own, and his teeth flashed as he grinned.

"Howdy," he drawled, and the inflection of his voice was like an echo from their own past. "Nice night, ain't it?"

"Peach," Windy assented.

The youth lighted his cigarette and tossed the match away. The momentary flare revealed eyes that were cold, mirthless, and singularly old by contrast to the boyish lines of his features. The mildness of his next words was also at odds with his sinister personality.

"You citizens live in these parts, huh?"

"In the vicinity," said Windy. "An' by the same token, you're a mite off yore own range, ain't you, cowboy?"

"Trailin through," explained the other. "Me an' a couple hands is taking some hosses up to the Snake River. We aimed to make it to the next village —what you call it?—Condon, by tonight. But our goats was kind of run into the ground, so we made camp."

"H'm," said Windy. "Seems like you pulled considerably off the main travel. Particularly if yore goats was in such shape."

"Follered up the creek," explained the youth. "I ain't complainin' about yore range, friends, but it runs heavy to rocks. We didnt find a level big enough to spread a poncho till we come to the hole in the wall yonder. It was deeded ground, but an alfalfa-trimmed party with the disposition of a bull snake finally give us permission to make camp for the night." He puffed slowly at his cigarette. "You citizens figger my story hangs together? Or is they another point or two on which you crave light?"

"Hombre," said Windy, his mustache bristling, "we wouldn't have questioned you none, except that yore actions provided food for thought. For instance, you was afoot up yonder, givin' us the once-over. Then you come ridin' around the bend casual, plumb surprised at meetin' up with us that a way."

"Cinch," said the youth cheerfully. "Somewheres this side of the flat a hosshair bridle jolted off the pack. I was prowlin along the trail up yonder afoot lookin' for it when I seen you citizens pulled up in the shadow an' talkin' it over. Havin' been taught from the cradle up to respect my elders, I wouldn't have come right out an' said yore actions was some suspicious. But now that we've gotten down to cases, how come you enterprisin' longhorns is sniffin' around the camp this a way? At an hour that is some late for social calls, an' so far off the main travel?"

To Windy, who was accustomed to assuming command in conversational struggles, the glibness of the self-as-

sured youth in thus turning the tables upon them was vastly irritating. If examined without prejudice, his story was reasonable, after all; his presence satisfactorily explained. Even the apparently damning circumstance of his spying from the point above was of no significance. Scrutinizing the trail for the lost bridle, he had observed the partners pulled up in the shadow. Their presence was obviously reason enough to ride down and investigate.

"If you're peace officers," said the youth, pressing his advantage, "yore interest is O. K. If it's a quaint custom of the region, we ain't makin' any holler. But if yore curiosity springs from any particular idea of yore own, let's have it."

"Might as well be sociable," agreed Windy. "We ain't peace officers. We'll break down an' confess that we're friends of the said alfalfa-trimmed bull snake you mentioned a while back. We had business with him early this evening, but he was a mite indisposed. So we come slopin' back at this indecent hour in hopes that he'd have his feet on the ground. You actin' like a look-out up yonder, an' knowing that Lobo ain't in the habit of entertainin' guests, made us wonder how come. An' now," he continued, tightening the reins, "seein' that everything's explained to the satisfaction of all concerned, we'll just push on inside, leavin' you to spend the rest of a large evenin' looking for yore said bridle."

"Wait," said the youth. His cigarette glowed. "Lobo's done retired to his den, swearin' to detach the scalp from the next optimist who disturbs him. It's nothin' to me either way, but if you gents crave to side-step embarrassment, I'd drag around to-morrow morning."

"Thanks," said Windy dryly. "We'll take a chance on the hereafter by bustin' up his beauty sleep. Any objections?"

The other's horse, a muscular and restive animal, was so disposed that it blocked the narrow trail. For an all but imperceptible interval the youth sat immobile, studying them from beneath his shadowed sombrero, the cigarette drooping motionless from his reckless lip. His left hand held the reins tightened as though in the act of turning aside. The thumb of his right hand was hooked casually in his gun belt.

"Just a second," he said. "I'm one of them slow thinkers. But whilst we been conversin' so genial this a way an idea has done occurred to me. I can see you long-whiskered lobos have been around a little. There's something about yore lingo that tells me you've stirred up the dust a little in ranges other than this forsaken wilderness. For instance, 'way south. Is they any chance that you pilgrims go by the names of McQuirk an' DeLong?"

"That's us," admitted Windy. "In person. An' the fact that you know our brands, cowboy, shorely throws a monkey wrench into yore story about driftin' in here this evening a stranger to these parts. Our likenesses ain't posted at no crossroads."

"Wrong again." said the youth. A slow grin suggested that his thoughts were leaping far ahead of his words. "You're that quick on the trigger. Our alfalfa-trimmed friend mentioned havin' met up with you gents in Condon to-day. From a remark or two he let fall concernin' yore general disposition an' earmarks, it suddenly dawned on me that here you was, like you said, in person. But that's neither here nor there." He reined aside with an appearance of belated courtesy. "It's plain you longhorns wasn't snoopin' around a while back. Excuse my low-brow suspicions. Nice night, ain't it?"

"Now listen," admonished Windy, as it became apparent that he proposed to accompany them. "Don't you let us keep you from continuin' yore search

for that nonpareil bridle. Horsehair, wasn't it, and silver trimmed?"

"Let it go," said the youth carelessly. "I'd already give up lookin' for the maverick. We'll find it in the morning."

It required no sixth sense to inform the partners that all was not as it seemed. Yet there was no apparent loophole in the youth's story. He was riding a little in advance of them now, on their weapon side, a fact that tended further to inspire confidence. He was whistling again, an irritatingly cheerful and lilting ditty at odds with the vastness and solitude about them.

Thus casually they rounded the high corner and came into view of the flat. The partners studied the scene with a lightning glance.

Midway between cabin and pool, a small camp fire gleamed. Beside this fire a man squatted like a huge toad, contemplating the coals. Another stood near by, his face turned toward them. Both were armed. There was no camp equipment in sight, no horses grazing in the flat.

"H'm," said Windy. "Travelin' kind of light, huh?"

"Bedded down in the corral," returned the youth. "Out of the wind."

"Where's that band of critters you're takin' up to the Snake River?"

"Hayed 'em in the barn," said the youth. "They was kind of ga'nt, so we euchered three-four bales out of Lobo an' give 'em a square meal."

"Yeah?" said Windy. "An' while Lobo was in such a generous mood, he undoubtedly set up the drinks, also?"

"They was only a quart or two left in that said demijohn," said the youth grinning. "We kind of lapped it up whilst we was talkin' it over."

"Listen," said Windy harshly. "Don't kid us, hombre. You ain't got any band of critters. You ain't headin' for no Snake River. You ain't makin' camp. What's it all about?"

"Tut, tut," reproved the youth. "I swear I never met up with such short-tempered an' suspicious buzzards before. Don't think nothin' at all about callin' a gent a liar right to his face, huh? Well, I'm an easy-goin' cuss. But keep a firm holt on yore suspicions whilst talkin' to my hard-boiled playmates, or you'll get an earful, pronto. Climb down, gents, an' we'll have a reg'lar visit."

He dismounted and stood grinning, thumbs hooked in his belt. They were now some forty paces from the fire. The one squatting beside it did not look up. His back was to the moon; his lowered sombrero kept his features in the shadow. The other, who was standing at the squatting one's elbow, was a gaunt person, his bony features covered with a gray stubble of beard. He was regarding them fixedly, his hands hanging loosely at his sides. The cabin loomed dark, silent. The door was open and a rectangle of moonlight lay athwart the floor.

"McQuirk," said Windy softly; and it was the first time the partners had exchanged words since encountering the hard-bitten youth. "This looks like an interestin' an' mysterious layout havin' something to do with our noble idea of earlier in the evenin'. It's up to us to see the last card, ain't it?"

"I reckon," said Lonesome. "Lead off, DeLong."

They dismounted and approached the fire side by side. The youth, preceding them, took up his position beside the squatting one, and pushed back his hat. The partners halted, facing the trio across the embers, their backs to the cabin.

"Chief," said the grinning youth, addressing the hunched figure at his feet. "It's up to me to make a report. These curious gorillas plumb insisted on busting in on us regardless. I looked 'em over whilst givin' them a song an' dance about how come we was here,

an' it come to me that they was made to order for what you got in mind. So instead of runnin' 'em off, I politely allowed 'em to come in an' officiate at their own funeral. They're McQuirk an' DeLong."

The other raised his head slowly; and as they glimpsed his features, the situation was no longer a mystery. He was pock-marked, with a cleft lip, the sleeper who had snored at their right while they had talked with the ancient one at Flannigan's.

"Well, well, McQuirk," drawled Windy. "So the critter wasn't asleep after all, huh? Got an idea from listenin' to that upliftin' conversation an' lost no time gettin' action on it. Rounded up the other polecats on his pay roll and swarmed in here to relieve pore ol' Lobo of all them useless shekels. Now, I ask you, ain't it a break that a couple of enterprisin' gunmen like us should stumble in just as they was gettin' ready to split the pot?"

They squatted on their haunches, pushed back their hats, and reached for the makings. They rolled cigarettes slowly, their genial, unwinking gaze fixed on the trio; and the gimlet eyes of the leader bored back into their own.

"Plumb humorous," he agreed at length. "You'd be surprised. Just make yoreselves comfortable, gents, whilst we look into this an' all chuckle in unison. But don't move." There was a brittle, sardonic quality in his voice, and as his gaze flicked above and beyond them, even before he uttered his next words, the partners stiffened. "Don't move," admonished the pock-marked one. "You're covered from the rear."

CHAPTER VII.

WHERE VULTURES GATHERED.

MOTIONLESS, Windy stared back. Lonesome, at his right, turned his head slowly, looked over his shoulder, and as slowly turned back.

"True, DeLong," he remarked, nodding. "Couple more polecats stepped out of the shack. Got their guns out an' pointed right at us."

"H'm," said Windy. "Seems like we didn't count noses in this layout, McQuirk. Result is, we're some embarrassed. Hospitable cusses, ain't they?"

In a slow, deliberate motion, he extended his left hand, took up a glowing ember, and applied it to his cigarette. He passed the brand to Lonesome, who also received it with his left hand.

"Hombre," said Windy, blowing a cloud of smoke upward, "you got the drop on us. Tell yore noble cutthroats to rest their gun arms easy for a spell. They's lots of time. Let's parley."

"It's an idea," agreed the other. "An' just to relieve the tension of the minnit, we'll ask you lads to hoist yore hands real slow whilst Chico an' Pete step up an' ease yore artillery out of harm's way."

He nodded in an all but imperceptible motion. Gun harness creaked as the desperadoes at their backs took a step forward.

"Hold everything," said Windy. The trio before them poised, the leader still squatting, the others standing rigid. The outlaws at the rear had halted. "We object. We got sentimental ideas concernin' our artillery. The right to carry arms is guaranteed by the Constitution, an' the same we've always maintained. Don't you rush us into no show-down, friends, till we've kind of give things the once-over."

The outlaw chief regarded them fixedly, his hard eyes smoldering.

"You hombres are either cool articles who've played in luck too long," he opined, "or blasted dumb. You figger we're bluffing? Snuffin' you out don't mean nothin' to us. Them lads behind you can plug a nickel at that distance, offhand. Yeah, an' do it for the nickel."

"But they's three of you in front of us," said Windy cheerfully. "With a slug in our backs we could still get you all. Pay attention now, hombre. Foller us close. You're from the South. You're older than these other lads. Maybe you heard of McQuirk an' DeLong, fifteen-twenty years back. Down along the Pecos. If so, you likewise heard some little rumor to the effect that where the pair of us is embroiled in a massacre, we generally contrive to get in a bite or two before the dust settles. Just you go slow for a minnit. Reachin' for our artillery starts the fur flyin'. Let's parley first. Find out what it's all about. For instance"—he flicked the ashes from his cigarette—"you don't even know why we're here."

The outlaw studied them for a space, his pock-marked features expressionless. The partners knew that never before in their checkered career had they stood so close to death.

They were not now deceived by the caliber of the men before them. They recognized the breed, as though the outlaws had risen up, full grown, from an all-but-forgotten past. Gunmen from the Southwest, products of a lurid region harried North from their natural dens by a belated citizen vigilance; desperadoes without scruple or capacity for remorse, devoid of principle, and with the cold, reptilian courage of the rattlesnake. They knew that the slightest sign of command from the cold-eyed leader would bring death belching upon them from the rear; that curiosity as to their motives, or a chance to better their own purposes, would stay the execution.

Yet they waited unperturbed, apparently relaxed but desperately steeled within again the impending crisis; nor did they exhibit the slightest emotion when the outlaw's next words indicated that Windy had gained his first point.

"You, Chico an' Pete," he directed, "rest easy for a minnit. But watch 'em. They're stinging lizards. If they wiggle their eyebrows, drill 'em. Andy," he addressed the reckless youth at his side with sour irritation, "you should have stopped these long-whiskered sharps at the Gap. Why in blazes did you bring them into the deal?"

"Cinch," said the youth, his bold eyes fixed almost genially upon the partners. "Whilst I was lookin' 'em over, I seen a chance to strengthen our hands. When I parleyed with 'em, it was final. They claimed to have business with our Santa Claus up yonder——" He jerked a thumb toward the cabin. "That's why they was ridin' in so casual. Maybe some one seen 'em headin this a way. It don't matter. Folks up to Condon seen 'em talkin' to Lobo in the pool hall. Well, then, we leave 'em scattered on the landscape here in front of the shack. Toes up. Their bandannas is tied around their whiskers like them story-book hold-up men. Lobo is likewise draped acrost the threshold, his gun in his hand with two-three empty shells in it. Yeah, an' what's the answer to this massacre which will keep this penny-ante region pop-eyed for the next six months? It's plain to be seen. The said McQuirk an' DeLong, havin' gained an inkling that Lobo was hidin' out an ungodly amount of shekels here in the canyon, come down to extract it. They done so, but in some way Lobo got to his gun an' slaughtered 'em. They slaughtered Lobo. All three cashed in. Sweet layout, huh? Yeah, an' one that leaves our trail covered so we don't have to make dust. We can stick around onsuspected an' continue to fatten off this stall-fed community. I ask you, chief"—he grinned complacently upon his leader—"is that a noble idea, or ain't it? I may be one of these slow thinkers, but man, do I get action when the wheels begin to move?"

This cold-blooded proposal told the partners anew how sinister was the situation into which they had ridden so casually, how savage were the forces that had leaped up to checkmate Lobo on his last deal, with his pitiful life's winnings in sight. The cheerful youth's scheme, furthermore, advanced in such an open and matter-of-fact manner, indicated how completely, in the outlaws' minds, their victims were in their power. And this also was implacable fact, despite Windy's assertions to the contrary. The trio facing them were skilled gunmen. Their hands, as they talked, remained carelessly poised within inches of their weapons. The slightest false motion on their part, the partners knew, would bring the crashing impact of bullets from the rear. They were caught between two fires.

"Sounds reasonable," agreed the pock-marked leader, nodding slowly as he pondered the proposal. "From what I gather, the records of these pilgrims is known hereabouts. It's common property that they used to be gun-totin' horned toads 'way South. Ace-high citizens now, but a gent can't outlive his past. Overcomin' their first shocked surprise at their back-slidin', folks'll shake their heads an' opine that they done met up with temptation, an' the said temptation made monkeys out of them. Too bad, but such is life. Yeah, Andy, I reckon you said something. It's an idea, no foolin'."

There was another phase of the situation that seemed diabolically planned by fate to make the proposed scheme flawless. It was known in Condon that the partners had that day been seeking mortgage money. It was also known that they had failed. Their chagrin at their failure was common knowledge. In view of these facts, and the mute evidence the outlaws proposed to leave in the canyon, what could be more obvious than the simple and damning conclusion that they had followed Lobo to his lair for the purpose of forcibly seizing upon the recluse's gold?

The moisture burst forth on the partners' foreheads at the realization. Not life alone, which they had wagered lightly in more than one desperate game of the past, but certain intangible but treasured things dearer than life—their standing in the community, the respect of neighbors and friends—were about to be tossed into the discard.

The outlaw was regarding them fixedly, his features settling into a stony mask. His henchmen stood rigid at his side. Certain all but imperceptible sounds came from the rear, the tiny creak of leather, a soft shifting of gravel underfoot; and as though a sixth sense enabled them to see the desperadoes in the rear, the partners knew that gun arms were raising slowly, taking aim, awaiting a signal.

Lonesome, in this crisis, steeled himself inwardly for the last play in the desperate game. The outlaw's mask-like features told him that the showdown was at hand. He put all thoughts from his mind but the resolve to wreak havoc during the problematical five seconds remaining between himself and eternity. They must strike before the signal was given. Assuming that Windy was doing likewise, he shifted his weight ever so slightly forward on the balls of his feet, preparing to leap aside, draw and shoot in the same motion, fall, shooting, to hand and knee, continue to pull the trigger while strength remained in his arm until his smoking weapon was empty, or the light grew dim.

"Wait," drawled Windy. "I got a better idea."

He made the statement in a matter-of-fact way, as he might have referred to the weather, the calf crop, or the price of hay. Yet Lonesome knew, knowing Windy of old, that some daring scheme that might extricate them

from their immediate desperate dilemma had leaped, full-grown, into his partner's mind.

"It's shock-proof, this idea I got," Windy continued, while measured seconds ticked by. "It's simple. It don't call for so many corpses. The way you got it figgered, you savvy"—he blew a cloud of smoke upward and appeared to squint at it critically—"they's liable not to be three dead soldiers here in the canyon, but six. Us an' Lobo an' the three of you. Why take chances? Just keep a holt of yore bloodthirsty instincts a minnit longer whilst I give you the earmarks of a deal that will push this Andy critter clean off the map. When it comes to ideas, he ain't been nowhere nor seen nothin'."

His very coolness gave the outlaw pause.

"Stallin' to postpone the execution a minnit longer, huh?" His cleft lip curled a little. "Well, talk's cheap. Only make it snappy, mister. Yore line's entertainin', but they's limits. Like Andy said, you noble goats was made to order for this business. If you figger yore blasted idea is goin' to save yore scalps, you're loco. But let's have it."

CHAPTER VIII.

WINDY'S ACE.

"FIRST," said Windy, "where's Lobo? You ain't shuffled off his mortal coil already?"

"He's up to the shack," said the outlaw. "Hawg tied, gagged, an' popeyed."

"How much did you shake him down for?"

"Since the results of this said cross-examination is passin' out with you," said the other dryly, "I don't mind sayin' that he assayed better than we figgered. They was about a thousand in his jeans, an' after we'd heated a brandin' iron an' got set to work over the soles of his feet, he done admitted that the rest of his stake was in a coffeepot up on the shelf. About nine thousand more. Why?"

"Why?" Windy jeered. "I'll tell you why, hombre. Ten thousand is only chicken feed compared to what that wolf's got salted away. You gents ain't in Texas now. Like the lad said a minnit ago, this here's a stall-fed community. When a feller in these parts has a stake, it's a stake that don't mean maybe."

"Yeah?" queried the outlaw, studying him intently. "So the polecat was holdin' out on us, huh? Interestin', if true. Well, mister, the information you've donated has done made the tie more binding. We've made a note of it. An' we'll give Lobo another workout—afterward."

"No, no, friend." Windy shook his head. "If you use yore heads they won't be any afterward. I haven't donated nothin'. You figger I'd give you such a gilt-edged tip unless I had an ace in the hole? This is it. You'll never get Lobo to tell where he's got his big stake hidden away. They's only one gent can make him break down an' confess. That's me."

"Bah!" said the other. "So that's the trade you had in mind! Pretty thin, feller. Me an' the lads is past masters in the art of makin' a hombre talk, an' I don't mean nothin' personal. If we can't persuade him to loosen up, it's a cinch you couldn't."

"That there Lobo," stated Windy, with conviction, "is a gent that's some sot in his ways, or I'm no judge of cross-grained humanity. You could toast his feet to a crisp an' give him the water cure, an' he'd just blink at you like a blasted mule. A square-headed feller like him don't feel no pain, once he's made up his mind."

"Which bears out a hunch I've had from the first," sneered the outlaw. "You're sayin' words that don't mean

nothin'. He didn't make no bones a-tall about confidin' in us. When he seen that iron he got sociable pronto."

"Sure he did," Windy countered swiftly. "An' why? He figgered it was cheap at the price. Sure you could have the ten thousand. But the forty thousand he's got left will keep him in beer an' skittles the rest of his life. Yeah. He confided in you. The maverick's dumb—like a fox."

"H'm," said the outlaw. "Forty thousand, huh? It's plain you like big talk." His glance flitted to his cronies at his side and beyond the partners. "Listen," he said, his gaze riveting again upon Windy. "Let's can this idle gossip an' talk turkey. What hay-wire deal you got in mind?"

"Just this," said Windy; and since, by comparison, the situation was under better control—in that the crisis had been postponed possibly minutes instead of seconds—he hazarded a brief, sidelong glance at Lonesome. "You hombres horned in on a fine little job that me and McQuirk had all framed up. Outnumberin' us this a way don't leave us much room for argument. Still an' all, we're entitled to our little profits. Particularly since the heftiest part of the business—makin' Lobo admit where his real stake is hidin' out—has still got to be done. We're the only gents that can get him to loosen up. An' how come? Because he believes we're ace-high citizens. So in return for this finished work, plus the rest of our scheme for leavin' our tracks covered, we'll just split the pot."

"Let's have more talk an' less words," growled the outlaw. "You mean you four-flushers was figgerin' on givin' Lobo the works? That's why you come slopin' around to-night, huh? Don't kid us, fellow. From all I could gather up to the blasted village, you longhorns are real stuffed shirts hereabouts."

"That was a front that has fooled the local natives," said Windy. "But citizens like you, who have cut their teeth in a hard region, know the earmarks of stingin' lizards. We was layin' our plans careful, waitin' for the big ten strike, an' when it popped up, danged if you mavericks didn't beat us to the gravy! It ain't right."

"Up to Condon," the other pointed out, "when this rickety Lobo was givin' you an earful, you listened sympathetic. You was stuffed shirts, or I don't know 'em when I see 'em."

"Until he flashed his roll," Windy nodded. "Just you think back, mister. After that, didn't I sell him on the theory that they wasn't anything to do but sit tight? Yeah, when we found he was well heeled we done some rapid figgerin'. Just like you." He grinned. "Only thing is, you mavericks beat us to the pot."

"If they's any wheat in all this chaff," the outlaw persisted, "why didn't you do your stuff when you come here earlier this evening? Nothin' holdin' you back an' nobody to split the pot with."

"He was polluted," said Windy. "We could have scooped up the chicken feed an' run. But we was after the heavy money. To find out where he had his barrel of iron men salted away, he had to be wide awake an' willin' to parley."

"H'm," said the other. "I can see you're always willin' to lay odds on yore ability as a snake-charmer. A little judicious apple sauce here, a little salve there, an' you're able to struggle along, huh?"

"It's a gift," said Windy complacently. "Up to Condon, did I send him away talkin' to himself, or didn't I? Under the proper circumstances he'll likewise get confidential about where his loot's hid out."

"Maybe," said the outlaw. "There's another point, feller. You're that full

of ideas, let's have your gilt-edge scheme for coverin' yore tracks. Assumin' that you talked this buzzard out of his loot, where did you figger on goin' from there?"

Windy affected to hesitate at this specific question. He scratched his lean jaw and pushed back his hat.

"Now listen," he demurred. "If we're makin' tradin' talk, you're rushin' along a mite fast. We ain't reached no agreement yet on splittin' the pot."

"You name it," said the other dryly, "an' we'll think about it."

"They's five of you," said Windy. "Before we talked in on you, you was figgerin' on splittin' ten thousand. That's two thousand apiece. If me an' McQuirk shake down another forty thousand into the pot, we're entitled to five apiece, or I'm a Chinaman. We don't aim to hawg nothin', an' to speak blunt an' earnest you got us outnumbered. But on that split, you noble buzzards would have eight thousand apiece, which is considerable more gravy than you planned on."

He named these figures in an offhand manner, yet he was keenly observant of their effect on the outlaws within his range of vision. The youth and the gaunt one were following the discourse with strictest attention. Their rigidity was relaxing. Their eyes glistened with cupidity and mounting interest. Only their sinister leader remained cold and apparently unmoved.

"H'm," said this one. "Five thousand each, huh? From the loot which you're fixin' to extract from Lobo after first mesmerizin' the critter. Where'd you get yore large ideas on how much he's got salted away?"

"Forty thousand or better," said Windy confidently. "That's my hunch an' I'm gamblin' it'll pan out."

"An' if less, what?"

"We'll take the same drag, more or less," said Windy. "One fourth of the pot."

The outlaw studied them for a space, his gimlet eyes narrowing. He glanced at his cronies and past the partners.

"Sounds reasonable," he said, at length. "But before we give our official O. K. to the layout, let's hear yore shock-proof formula for coverin' yore tracks."

"It's so danged simple," said Windy, "that we'll call time out for a couple minutes so you hombres can kick each other for not thinkin' of it yourselves. It's a natural. The lad here, you'll recall, figgered that three corpses was necessary for the perfect alibi. Fact is, they's only need for one. That's Lobo. His usefulness is done when we got his shekels. So we'll just dress the critter up in his best Sunday clothes an' bump him off with his own gun. We'll set him at the table with the empty demijohn beside him. On the said table is a letter he's written to his gal, tellin' her good-by. They ain't anything disturbed in the shack. We leave some shekels in his pocket. What's the answer?" He waved his hand in a regal gesture. "It's a cinch, friends. Maybe a month from now, maybe a year, some one comes projectin' into this blind alley. The story's plain. Ol' Lobo, who's lived alone by choice, has died the same way. Got tired of it all an' shuffled off, after tellin' his gal good-by. It wouldn't even cause a stir in these parts. They wouldn't be any suspicion of sculldug-gery. It would all be as easy to see as a large white horse in a pantry. Yeah, an' the longer it is before some curious maverick strays into the canyon, the more perfect the layout'll be. An' that's that." His black eyes glittered. "Just ponder it, friends. Is it a humdinger, or ain't it?"

In advancing this ruthless proposal, as Windy himself was well aware, he was taking long chances; for he had no means of knowing at what stage in Lobo's condition the outlaws had rid-

den into the canyon. But their reaction told him that luck had played into his hands. Two of those across the fire grinned openly. An appreciative chuckle came from the rear. Even the impassive features of him of the cleft lip relaxed a little, though his hard eyes betrayed no emotion.

"Chief," announced the youth frankly, "I'm a blasted goat! These longhorns know their vegetables at that, huh? Fact is, hombre," he told Windy, grinning, "Lobo was all dressed up in his best war paint when we pussy-footed up a while back, settin' at the table readin' a letter he'd wrote to his gal! It shows you figgered him out. Yeah, you got me faded. I'm withdrawin' my idea, pronto, an'——"

"Shut up," commanded the leader coldly. "It ain't any disrespect to yore mental machinery, Andy, to tell you that you ain't equipped to talk to these snakes. Now, hombre, let's get this straight. You crave to horn into this game. Had yore eyes on Lobo's shekels all the while, which is why you popped up to-night. Findin' us on the job, an' hostile, you're tradin' yore scalps for a better idea in the business of coverin' our tracks. You're now placin' yore bets that you can persuade Lobo to tell us where he's got more loot salted away, an' all you crave is a cut in the said loot. That's yore story, an' you aim to cling to it regardless, huh?"

Windy nodded.

"We'll give it a whirl," said the outlaw.

He rose from his squatting position, and the partners rose with him.

"You, Chico an' Pete," the outlaw directed, "an' Andy, trail along behind whilst we move up to the shack. Shorty, ease up an' light the lamp. Just recall, boys, that we don't know nothin' more about these sharps than we did before, exceptin' what this windy snake-charmer has told us. Talk's cheap, an' seein' is believin'. If he can't produce accordin' to Hoyle, it's a horse on them. Meanwhile, keep yore eyes peeled. We're coppering our bets. Gents"—he waved them forward—"it's yore deal."

CHAPTER IX.

LOBO'S GOLD.

NOW, Lonesome had no inkling of Windy's plan of procedure. The fact that his iron-souled partner had been able to avert a show-down thus far was miracle enough. That crisis was merely postponed, it was evident, for to desperadoes of this caliber human lives meant nothing. The slightest false move, the least suspicious circumstance in whatever long chance Windy was attempting to play, would be ruinous. Four of the outlaws had obviously reacted to his cool argument, their cupidity aroused by the suggestion that more spoils were in prospect; but the leader, whose alert and suspicious intelligence outranked the others by far, was still weighing them in the balance.

In vain, Lonesome strove to analyze Windy's purpose in shifting the scene to the cabin. When the crisis resolved into gun play, as appeared inevitable. cramped quarters lessened their chances to survive. Yet his partner's careless glance, before they had quitted the fire, had warned him to be on guard, to evince no surprise at whatever the situation developed, and to follow his, Windy's, lead blindly.

In silence they moved up the moonlit slope. The leader of the outlaws walked at Windy's elbow and a little back. The youth and the two silent gunmen fell in at the rear. The gaunt one preceded them into the cabin. A match flared, and the gloomy interior sprang into light.

Windy halted at the threshold and beckoned the pock-marked one close.

The trio at the rear pressed in to listen.

"You lads savvey," Windy whispered, "that to make this maverick loosen up, I got to make things appear what they ain't. If I sell him on the theory that I'm one of the knights in shinin' armor, don't you draw no wrong conclusions. Lobo's got a head on his shoulders, an' I got to use finesse."

"All we crave is results," growled the leader. "An' pronto. Shoot the works an' make it snappy. But no funny moves. Not any."

"O. K.," returned Windy. "An' don't you short-tempered citizens likewise develop a short memory when it comes to splittin' the pot. We get our drag an' no argument. Let's go."

Thus they entered the cabin. The gaunt outlaw, having lighted the bracket lamp, stood back against the wall, thumbs hooked in his belt. To his right and left on the outer edge of the circle of light, the others took up their positions, like grim spectators facing a stage. Their gun harness creaked into silence. The partners remained in the center of the room, their gaze fixed on Lobo.

He was trussed like a fowl in his rawhide chair, bound hand and foot so that he was incapable of movement. The tough reata encircled his body with such savage tightness as to be half buried in his bulging limbs, and his thick wrists, with the circulation cut off, were swollen and throbbing. He was gagged with a bandanna which cleft his bewhiskered features like a maniac grin. He breathed with difficulty, because of the gag and the bonds that constricted his chest.

Helpless though he was, utterly defenseless as a stricken animal around which vultures have gathered, he yet glared back at the partners, his eyes smoldering and indomitable. A light flamed in their sullen depths as his gaze met Windy's. It might have been a species of cynical surprise, or mocking defiance, or hope. It passed; yet there was, in that fleeting expression, something that stirred Lonesome to the depths, something pathetic, wistful, and challenging.

Almost guiltily he realized that in the late tense moments he had been thinking only of himself and Windy, their ability to extricate themselves from a desperate dilemma into which chance had led them. Self-preservation was the first law; and he had assumed unthinkingly that all Windy's desperate sparring for time, his ingenious perversion of facts that would tend to hold off the outlaws for a moment longer, was designed solely to save their own lives. Now he knew, as Windy's glittering eyes studied his bewhiskered protégé, and his mustache bristled into a rare and engaging grin, that his hard-bitten and unyielding partner, having put his hand to the plow, had no intention of turning back. Whatever long chance he proposed to play involved Lobo as well as themselves.

"Well, well, old son," said Windy. "This here's a regular surprise party that's moved in on you, huh? I'll gamble you didn't figger you had so many thoughtful neighbors interested in yore welfare. But you don't look comfortable, somehow. For a gent that runs heavy to conversation, that there gag is shorely a handicap. Let's have it off, so we can while away a minnit or two in idle gossip."

He stepped forward, loosened the knotted bandanna, and cast it to one side. He backed away, leaned against the table in careless posture, and drew forth the makings. In this position, the bound prisoner was on his right, Lonesome on his left, and the trio faced the semicircle of silent outlaws.

With the gag removed, the ancient one shook his head as though to re-

move cramp and stiffness from aching jaw and neck. But he said nothing. His sullen eyes roved around the group and returned to fix on Windy.

"Lobo," said the latter, blowing a cloud of smoke upward. "You probably ain't in the dark as to why these other lads is here. But maybe you're some curious as to how come me an' McQuirk popped up on the scene this a way, huh?"

"Don't make no difference," growled the ancient one. "Five coyotes or seven, what's the odds?"

"I'll tell you," said Windy. "Foller me close. Up to Condon you come to me an' McQuirk for advice. We gave it, an' you sloped away. Later, it come to me that I'd done bore down too hard. So we rode around to finish the job right."

"Sure you did," agreed their prisoner bitterly. "Where I slipped up was flashin' my roll. But these other buzzards beat you to it. Question is, what more do you want from me? You got all my worldly goods, for which I worked an' struggled for forty years. What's pesterin' you now?"

"Just leave me explain," said Windy, "in words you're able to grasp. They's plenty pesterin' me an' McQuirk. An' you also. It's our scalps, old son. This is the layout. That hard-looking citizen"—he waved his cigarette toward the leader of the outlaws—"having observed you flash yore roll up to Condon, immediately gathered his noble cutthroats around him an' come down to collect. He collected yore shekels without any particular argument on the theory that he was to leave you struggle along, huh? Well, sir, that wasn't his theory at all. Fact is, he was discussin ways an' means of bumpin' you off to the best advantage, when me an' McQuirk rode in. He was double crossin' you, Lobo. It don't sound reasonable to you, maybe, on account of you spendin' yore life in this easy-goin' community where a gent's life is supposed to be worth something. But these lads is bull rattlers from a snake-infested region."

Lonesome was aghast at Windy's sheer audacity in thus stating the bald facts of the case in the presence of the outlaws. Then, in a flash of understanding, he saw his partner's purpose, which was to impress, at first, not Lobo, but the outlaws with the rôle he had assumed.

"When we rode in unsuspectin'," Windy continued, "not figgerin' on anything else but the neighborly business of givin' you some more advice, you know what these side-winders done? Got the drop on us, by gravy, an' proceeded to figger out a neat scheme for usin' our corpses! They'd bump you off like they'd planned. They'd likewise bump us off. Then they'd leave our mortal coils scattered around the premises so it would look like me an' McQuirk tried to stick you up an' all three of us passed out in the jamboree. You follerin' all this, old son? How does it listen to you?"

"Like a bedtime story," stated Lobo. "But just you keep on. Here's once in yore life you got a feller where he's got to listen regardless."

"Be patient," Windy admonished. "I'll prove what I'm sayin' pronto, in a way that'll make yore eyes stick out. Well, seein' that me an' McQuirk had done walked into a hornet's nest this a way, it was up to us to buy our way out. How to do it? We sold 'em on the idea that we was likewise after yore shekels. That didn't draw much water, on account of them already havin' possession of the said shekels. But we done pointed out that you was holding out on 'em. That ten thousand they shook you down for was only chicken feed. You had a barrel more salted away. Thirty, forty thousand. Maybe more. Gold!"

He gave the last word a significant

emphasis, thrusting his truculent face close. The ancient one said nothing. His features were a bewhiskered mask. He stared back stonily.

"Whereupon," Windy continued, straightening up, "they got interested. An' we made a deal. The deal is that you shell up with the rest of yore loot without no argument. They split the loot with us, an' you save yore scalp. Which same we guarantees. Otherwise, the three of us are sunk. Sounds reasonable, don't it?"

"Bah!" growled Lobo. "You talk to me like I was a halfwit. If it was true, you wouldn't be sayin' it. Don't waste yore breath, mister. If you-all figger on bumpin' me off, make it snappy. If not, turn me loose an' beat it an' leave me be. I'm too old an' tired for no more nonsense."

"Lobo," said Windy softly. "Keep a holt of yoreself a minnit longer. We're comin' into the home stretch. I'll prove I'm talkin' straight. If you're on yore toes an' the old mental machinery's movin' like I figger it is, you'll get my meanin'. You'll follow me"—he flicked the ashes from his cigarette with an airy gesture as he stated the significant word—"blind.

"For instance, old son, you prob'ly didn't know it, but me an' McQuirk run heavy to that mysterious business that some folks call spiritualism, an' other folks call mental telepathy an' sundry high-soundin' terms. When we was playin' poker up to Condon tonight, I set back between hands an' shut my eyes, an' I seen you down here in the canyon. You was kind of on my mind, you savvy, on account of that hard-boiled advice I done donated. Now foller me close, Lobo, an' see if I don't call 'em right. You was settin' here at the table. Dressed up like you are now in yore Sunday war paint. You was writin' a letter to yore gal. It come hard, so you was bolsterin' yoreself up from that there demijohn. Yore six-shooter was beside you. You aimed to finish that there letter an' shuffle off. But you passed out first an' set there, asleep.

"Now, whilst you was asleep, you done some spirit-writin'. Just like yore gal was standin' at yore shoulder an' givin' strength to yore hand. That's the way them spirits do. Yore hand moved the pencil acrost the page—whilst you was dead to the world, old son! Shall I tell you what yore gal wrote through yore own hand?" Windy squinted at the ceiling, like one who calls upon his memory for a colossal task. "She says: 'Dad, come home. We haven't much to offer you on account of losing everything we had in the hard times here, but it's home as long as you want to stay. Through all these years I've been lonesome to see you. Come quickly, dad.' You still figgerin' I'm lying, old son?"

It was quiet in the room. The outlaws stood motionless, intent. Incomprehensible though the dialogue was, the drama of the situation held them rooted to the spot. For Lobo sat as one mesmerized, or staggered by the impact of significant fact. He stared up at Windy, wide-eyed, and tiny points of perspiration stood out on his shaggy forehead.

"When you woke up," Windy continued, "you read that there spirit-writin'. An' you rubbed yore eyes an' read it again. You couldn't savvy it. You didn't have to savvy it. It was like offerin' you hope of the hereafter. So you leaped up an' got organized to travel, an' right then these gents showed up an' gummed up the whole works. That's the record, ain't it? It's funny about this spirit stuff, Lobo." Windy spoke almost musingly, as though lost in thought. "They can do the ghost writin' an' so forth. But they's lots of things they can't do. Like takin' the shells out of a feller's gun. Or helpin' him out of a jack

pot that looks like it's final. Them things require human hands, an' steady nerves, an' gents that can make lowly treys look like a straight flush."

Insignificant words, to the outlaws. Yet as Lobo pondered them, he relaxed slowly. His shaggy head sagged a little in what might have been an all but imperceptible nod. His sullen eyes, expressionless now, remained fixed on Windy with a kind of bovine intentness.

"Well," said Windy, pulling himself together with an appearance of briskness. "I can see you're an alert ol' maverick who can tell sheep from goats. But they's nothin' of this spirit business in what you're up against now. You're convinced I'm talkin' straight, huh? If I tell you to shell out with what you got hid, you'll do so, an' take my word for it that you'll come out O. K.?"

The ancient one hesitated as if in doubt, then nodded.

"Fine," said Windy. "We'll rush things along to a snappy conclusion. Lobo, they's somethin' in your activities for the past twenty years that these hombres don't know nothin' about. They ain't a soul in these parts know it, you've kept it hid so well. I'll gamble even McQuirk don't suspect it. But you can't fool ol' DeLong, who is an observin' hombre an' capable of puttin' two an' two together. I'm referrin' to the secret of yore blasted prosperity. You didn't make yore stake runnin' cattle, nor bootleggin', nor raisin' garden truck. When I was down by the creek, I seen thirty, forty tons of rock in that ongodly pool. It looked like tailin's from a mine. Yore shack is backed smack against the cliff. They's a beaten trail leadin' to the creek. Not the kind of a trail made by a feller totin' a pail of water up the hill onct a day, but like a wheelbarrow loaded heavy had trundled over it maybe a couple thousand times. Yore hands is the horny hands of a hard-rock man. Lobo"—Windy's glittering gaze swept the cabin slowly; and as though mesmerized, the outlaws craned their necks to peer with him—"where is yore mine?"

"There ain't any mine——" began the ancient one, his eyes fixed on Windy's face.

"Tut, tut!" admonished Windy. "You forgettin' you ain't goin' to stall with me? Sure you kept it hid for half yore life, it bein' nobody's business but yours. But the time has come when all things hidden has got to come to light. Speak up, ol' son."

"Back yonder." Lobo gestured with his shaggy head toward the rear, where a huge cupboard occupied the center of the wall. "They's a drift," he muttered, "runnin' straight back."

"Aha!" said Windy. "Camouflaged by that trick cupboard, huh? Now we're gettin' to the meat of the cocoanut. For twenty years or more you been busy as a beaver here an' nobody suspectin'. Just pluggin' along. Chucklin' up yore sleeve at folks who thought you an indigent ol' maverick, starvin' on a penny-ante ranch! Yeah. An' what kind of rock did you find in yonder, Lobo?"

"Free-millin'," muttered the ancient one, head hanging. "Pounded it out in the mortar as I went along. Just made wages for a considerable spell. Figgered it to peter out, but I follered it back."

"Yeah? An' what did you find, ol' son—before it petered out? A pocket?"

The ancient one nodded. His rough-hewn features were glistening. "Just after my woman died an' my gal skinned out, I struck it."

"Dang' near solid gold, huh? How much, Lobo? A thousand ounces, maybe?"

"Clost to two thousand." The ancient one's voice was barely above a whisper. He raised his tortured eyes

to Windy's face as though peering up from a pit. "It was the end of the pay. There wasn't any more. I pushed in a few laterals but didn't find nothin'. So maybe a month ago I quit an' set back. Tired that a way, an' what was the use? My woman was gone, an' my gal——"

"H'm!" Windy cut in ruthlessly. "Never mind yore troubles, old son. Two thousand ounces, huh? Let's see, now, at twelve ounces to the pound, that would stack up to maybe a hundred and—— Good grief, Lobo! A hundred and seventy pounds of gold. Solid gold! You danged old fox!"

While making these mental calculations, Windy had affected to study his cigarette; but beneath lowered brows, his narrowed eyes swept the outlaws. Their faces were predatory, intent, like those who stand on the threshold of a material Valhalla. The reckless youth licked his lips. The smoldering eyes of the pock-marked leader were fixed on Lobo, as one who doubts the evidence of his own ears.

"Solid gold," Windy repeated, musingly. "The real dirt. More than a feller could carry. Well, I'm danged! Now then, old son, let's get to the interestin' part. Don't be bashful, now. Where you got that ungodly amount of loot salted? In the shaft, of course, since it's made to order. Way back?"

"Way back," said the ancient one. "In a couple saddlebags. 'Bout forty feet in, they's a fault I got shored up. It's on top of them timbers."

"H'm!" said Windy, marking the raging impatience of the outlaws, who swayed a little on their feet, leaning toward the concealed door as though an invisible force wrough upon them like a magnet. "About this gold, Lobo. How was you able to change it into coin of the realm without nobody hearin' about it? I mean the chicken feed you had on yore person an' in the shack."

"Banker Hoskins up to Condon took care of it for me. Never told a soul. I figgered I'd get more of a kick out of lookin' at real money. But they's somethin' about gold——"

"Yeah!" Windy cut in. "They's somethin' about gold. Fact is, it reminds me that our idle gossipin' is done." He rose briskly, ground his cigarette beneath his heel. He grinned knowingly upon the outlaws, his mustache bristling. These stared back, their unwinking gaze betraying a watchfulness that was now of a different order.

"Folks," Windy announced, rubbing his bony hands together, "just you stay put for a spell whilst me an' my honest partner do a little sleuthing in this said shaft. Come on, McQuirk."

He strode toward the cupboard, Lonesome at his heels. As though impelled by a single motive, the outlaws moved forward with them.

Before the cupboard, whose innocent-appearing shelves bore an array of cooking utensils, Windy halted, at a loss, and scratched his lean jaw.

"Crowbar layin' along the top shelf," the ancient one explained listlessly. "Another at the bottom. They're seated in the timber like bolts. Pull 'em back."

Windy pushed the kettles aside on the high shelf. A segment of rusty iron bar was revealed, thick and heavy. He laid hold of this and slid it back. Squatting, he pawed among the array on the lower shelf, revealing a second bar. He slid this back, and rose to his feet, methodically dusting his hands. The whole cupboard quivered a little, being obviously hinged at the right.

Despite Windy's elaborate carelessness of manner, Lonesome sensed that the crisis was upon them. As his partner laid hold of a shelf and waved the others back so that the hidden door could swing out, he marked Windy's lean shoulder muscle trembling. Ter-

rific indeed, Lonesome knew, was the tension that could cause even such slight evidence of nervousness or trepidation as this.

Yet what followed was simple enough; and it was only afterward that Lonesome saw how carefully his iron-nerved partner had prepared for this climactic moment.

Windy pulled back upon the shelf. The whole section of wall upon which the cupboard was imposed swung outward, creaking on heavy hinges; and reflected light from the bracket lamp shone into a gloomy shaft that pierced the living rock. Only for a few feet was the cavern illumined vaguely. Beyond, its jagged contours, glistening in points of light, faded swiftly into impenetrable blackness.

Prepared though all had been for what the swinging wall would reveal, the presence of the shaft was staggering. It was like a doorway to another world. To the partners, it was also as though a curtain had been drawn aside from their stolid prisoner's past. While other men of the high desert had toiled through the years in smiling fields, ridden with their dreams through sun-drenched hills, chuckled with neighbors where the blue sky arched, Lobo had here burrowed in insensate rock, in darkness and alone. A mortar loomed near the arched entrance. A rough shelf bearing a crude chemical outfit paralleled the jagged wall. With the opening of the door, dead air eddied upon them, dank and chill, bearing upon its breath the faint odor of ancient explosives. From far down the dark corridor came the drip of moisture.

But Windy did not pause to ponder over this monument to years of toil. He grunted with satisfaction when the shaft was revealed, and rubbed his hands anew. A guttered candle in an empty can, forming a crude miner's pit lamp, lay at his feet. He snatched this up, and with trembling fingers lighted it.

"Come on, McQuirk," he directed, "we'll go after the gravy. Man, do I crave to give that loot the once-over!"

But even as Lonesome pushed forward, the heavy hand of the outlaw chief fell on Windy's shoulder, spinning him around. His cleft lip was curled in a virulent sneer.

"Just hold yore horses, feller," he admonished. "Go after the gravy, huh? You're a mite too previous. Just stand back an' act real genteel an' polite. Yore haywire work is done. You, Chico, an' Pete, an' Shorty—watch these mavericks. Gimme that light, feller. Andy, trail along."

He snatched the light, and shouldered past Windy, with the youth at his heels. Their footsteps rattled in the cavern. A faint segment of illumination preceded them into remote depths.

The three remaining outlaws turned smoldering eyes from Windy to the shaft and back again.

"Well, I'm danged!" blustered Windy, eying them with belligerent astonishment. "Why didn't he let me an' McQuirk fetch back that loot? Does he figger that he an' Andy can hide out some of that dust? What's goin' on, anyway? Son of a gun!" He whirled to point a quivering finger at Lobo. "Listen, ol' son. Is they another way out of that shaft? Any chance those snakes can slide out with the loot an' leave us talkin' to ourselves?" Before the ancient one could speak, he turned savagely upon the others. "Let's rush 'em," he announced, smiting his hands together. "Does he figger we're a bunch of saps? Are we entitled to a split on that gold, or ain't we? One side, men."

But the others did not stand aside. Windy's words inflamed their own instant suspicion and raging impatience. They turned and charged into the shaft, their eyes fixed on the distant

light ahead. They crowded hard upon each other, mouthing curses as they stumbled, reeling back from impact against the rough projections of the way. The sound of their progress faded. They were gone.

Whereupon Windy stepped back with a catlike movement, pushing Lonesome aside. The heavy door creaked shut. Windy clutched at the topmost bar, and Lonesome, his own fingers trembling now, pushed the lower bar home.

"Back!" Windy ordered. "Drag Lobo back against the wall. Out of line."

"Don't need to," muttered Lobo, his chin sunk on his chest. "Four-inch timbers in the door. Bullets can't touch it. An elephant couldn't bust it down. 'S all right."

Nevertheless, they dragged him back. Against the wall the partners stood, and their hands stole toward their guns.

As from the bowels of the earth, hoarse shouts reëchoed. The heavy door shook a little beneath the impact of hurtling bodies. These futile efforts ceased and, following a breathless hush, came the muffled explosions of gunfire. But no wood splintered between the cupboard shelves. The heavy, seasoned timbers might have been armor plate. The sound of men coughing in acrid smoke dwindled into a momentary silence from which arose a babel of sound composed of animal-like bellowings, imprecations, and threats.

"An' that's that," said Windy, his mustache bristling, as he stooped over Lobo's bonds. "Their hand's played out."

The ancient one rose stiffly. He hobbled about the room, easing his cramped muscles. Bowed down at first, all but paralyzed, he unfolded slowly as circulation was restored, drew more erect.

The partners sprawled at restful length in rawhide chairs, and Lonesome mopped his face with a huge bandanna.

"When you get kind of organized, old son," said Windy, "you can sprint over to the Bar Z an' send one of the lads for the sheriff. With the help of a gallon or two of ammonia an' other persuaders he'd ought to be able to fetch them snakes out of their hole. But that's his business." He sighed. "Like that hard-boiled critter said a minnit ago, our haywire work is done."

"DeLong," averred Lonesome, and there was awe in his voice, "that's the nearest that you an' me will ever come to knowin' what corpses think about. Or Lobo. The next time yore continuous conversation kind of bears me down, I'll just recall a certain minnit when we was squattin' by the fire with three sharp-shooters in front of us an' two more drawin' a fine bead on our backs, with nothin' between us an' the hereafter but a soft-spoken gent who's capable of playin' a thousand-to-one shot as calm as if it was a cinch bet! You're there, cowboy, an' I don't mean maybe."

"Sho!" said Windy. "Yore kind words is much appreciated. But it was Lobo who played 'em like a royal flush, McQuirk! The biggest gamble was gettin' it acrost to him that we was on his side an' still not let them polecats know it. He got the idea an' come through noble. Held back on the information just enough to make 'em think he hated to talk. Up till then, that split-lipped citizen was watchin' me like a snake. Thereafter, he figgered it was a cinch. They was nothin' to it, an' he'd done fallen heir to five hundred per cent more loot than he'd planned on. His judgment bein' dazzled that a way, the rest was easy."

"Listen," said Lobo, halting before the partners and peering down at Windy. "About this spirit business. You lads had been around earlier in the evenin', huh? It was you that

wrote in them words from Mattie an' took the shells out of my gun?"

"Yeah," said Windy softly. "But don't you get burned up, old son. We wasn't foolin' you none whatever. Look——" He fumbled in his pocket and drew forth the telegram from Montana. "There's yore ticket home."

The ancient one smoothed out the crumpled message and read it slowly. He read it again, then folded it, and placed it in his pocket. He looked down at Windy, and there was something in his unwinking gaze that caused that worthy to squirm in acute embarrassment.

"Get a holt of yoreself," he said truculently, though the other had not spoken. "Don't you look at me popeyed that a way, like I'd suddenly sprouted wings an' was all snarled up in shinin' robes. Just because we done took an interest in yore affairs don't mean nothin' at all. Fact is, it was my natural oneriness that got me entangled in this deal in the first place. After that, I was just talkin' to save our own mangy hides. Well"—he rose briskly—"let's get goin'. By gravy, I got a better idea about this sheriff business, McQuirk. Lobo's headin' for Montana pronto. We'll hold the fort an' he can start now, an' keep goin'. On the way through town, he can send the sheriff an' a posse back."

"Can't be done." The old-timer shook his head, blinking. "You're forgettin' that the worldly goods that caused all this fracas is likewise bottled up with them polecats."

"That's right," said Windy. "I'd forgotten them shekels which they're carryin' on their persons."

"An' the dust," said the ancient one simply.

"You mean to say they's actually a barrel of gold in there?"

The ancient one nodded.

"Well, I'm danged!" said Windy. "I took it for granted that yore total wealth was represented by that coin of the realm. I was stallin' about there bein' any real dirt in there. I figgered you was, too, just to back my play."

"Two thousand ounces," said Lobo. "In saddlebags up on them timbers. An' listen, mister. Don't interrupt me now. Bein' old an' busted down, an' aimin' to spend my declinin' years just like I've dreamt about—'way yonder in Montana surrounded by Mattie's progeny, with my own folks that a way an' not alone no more—they ain't many ways I can show my appreciation to you noble pilgrims. Whatever they is left in life for me, you've furnished, an' in my lowly fashion I crave to do a little something for you upstandin' lads which will strengthen yore arms. When I fetch the sheriff an' he drags out them snakes, he'll also fetch out that dust. Half of it's yores, an' no back talk."

"That's aplenty," said Windy, with a ferocious glare. "Where do you get yore funny ideas? You don't owe us nothin'. Fact is, I'm in yore debt, havin' done acquired wisdom on my own account from this little séance. We wouldn't touch that loot with a ten-foot pole. Mattie needs it. The young 'ones need schoolin', an' her man's got to have capital to make a new start. Beat it!" he admonished sternly. "We won't take a sou, an' that's final. Saddle yore critter an' go get the sheriff. Hurry up, on yore way, now."

"It ain't right," protested the ancient one. "You could use some of that dust. Buy you a bigger ranch. Put yore brand on more beef——"

"We don't want a bigger ranch," Windy cut in. Aware of Lonesome's twinkling gaze, he pulled his hat lower over his eyes, and grinned sheepishly. "We don't want more beef. Out of the various gymnastics in which I've engaged since noon to-day, I've done acquired heavy knowledge. Me an'

McQuirk's settin' pretty. Get going, mister." He laid hold on the ancient one and urged him toward the door. He smote him on the back and propelled him forth into the vivid moonlight. "Nice night, ain't it?"

When the sound of Lobo's departure had died in the canyon, profane bellowings broke forth anew from the shaft, muffled and bestial. Windy arched a supercilious eyebrow at Lonesome. Chuckling, the latter made a fastidious gesture of distaste. With one accord they moved across the threshold and seated themselves on the rocky slope, out of earshot but within sight of the door that held their prisoners entrapped. Each sighed restfully, pushed back his hat and reached for the makings with a languid gesture.

Smoke from their cigarettes rose in thin spirals on the breathless air. Far down in the line of tules a lone bullfrog raised a raucous challenge. Another answered, and another; a swelling chorus that seemed somehow akin to the majestic solitude of the canyon and the wavering glory of the high moon.

"Tut, tut, DeLong," Lonesome murmured. "You didn't even crave to borrow that mortgage money from Lobo. How come?"

"Wheresoever there's gold," proclaimed Windy, "they's likewise grief. Surround yoreself with shekels, an' the buzzards come flockin' in. The bigger yore bank account, the fewer real friends you got. If we was plutocrats we wouldn't have no neighbors at all. Just hostile an' envious folks who was livin' close. Yeah. We got as neat a li'le ranch as a pessimist could ask for. We ain't mortgagin' nothin'. I'm lookin' forward to gettin' back to the roost, McQuirk." His mustache bristled into the semblance of a ferocious snarl as he yawned luxuriously. "Snore for a spell in my trundle bed. Then rise up like a roarin' lion an' turn our attention to them mundane an' trivial things that makes life worth while."

"Like diggin' post holes?" suggested Lonesome.

"You'd think of that," Windy accused. "It's just yore caliber when a gent's bendin' his intellect to philosophy an' kindred subjects. Yeah. Even post holes!"

A GRAYLING GETS HOOKED

If one has to be caught at all, it is to be supposed that one would prefer to be caught by an expert. So the gamy grayling which took the bait for an executive on holiday, might offer an unusually good excuse for his capture.

This event is altogether a very interesting one. In addition to being achieved by a master fisherman, it had other unusual angles. The fishing season on the Brule River was on the eve of closing. The grayling caught was one of fifty which were let out in the river a short time ago for the express purpose of offering good sport to the distinguished visitor, and, to make a happy ending, the fish was caught by moonlight, for only a bright moon guided the fisherman.

The graylings were originally brought to the Cedar Island lodge fish hatcheries two years ago for the purpose of ascertaining if they could live and reproduce in these waters. They are commonly considered the hardest fish to bait. The merits of graylings, from the fisherman's point of view, are that they have small and tender mouths and they are very game when actually hooked.

Stars And Crosses

By Roland Krebs

Author of "Shorty Bucks Big Business," etc.

SEVERAL times in the past I've made myself believe that "Shorty" Nolan was cured of the idea that, as a tragedian, he was due to out-troupe Joseph Jefferson and Edwin Booth, but I was mistaken. This time, though, I'm sure of it.

The thing that worked what I think is a permanent cure was a tragic melodrama entitled "For Love and Honor"—and it almost cost the little cow-punch fifty bucks.

When news reached the R Bar R that "For Love and Honor" was going to be put on in town at the Elks Hall at four dollars a seat, for the benefit of the kids in the county orphans' home, why, Shorty was almost in a fever from hoping he could get into the cast.

"I thought you were all caught up on being a Thespian," I said, showing my surprise.

Shorty made a serious face and frowned.

"I don't think a person had aught to get discouraged too easy," he said. "Just because the breaks went against me ain't any positive indication that the drama ain't my *métier*."

"Your what?"

"My racket, you might say."

"Who's going to be the casting director for this here show, Shorty?" I asked.

"The Widow Marston," he answered, "and I kind of think maybe she'll give me a part. I got a sort of a stand-in with her on account of her boy, Archie, likes me—that Boy Scout kid, you know."

Well, when Shorty heard that "Slim" Evers, also of our outfit, also was hoping to be cast into the show, why, getting into the meller got to be actually a mania with him. That's on account of them two being rivals for the affections

of the pretty little Snake Hollow school teacher.

Shorty got extra nice with Archie Marston, a pest if any kid ever was one. He sharpened up an old hunting knife and gave it to the kid for his Boy Scout activities. He gave Archie a rod and reel, showed him how to take the ball-bearing collars out of his bicycle and clean and grease them, and bought the brat about five dollars' worth of ice-cream cones.

I don't know whether it was due to all this attention to Archie or whether the Widow Marston took to smoking opium, but anyway, she picked Shorty Nolan to play—steady, now!—the hero! Gosh! I thought he'd go cuckoo when he got the glad tidings. He busted into the bunk house, where I was writing a letter, and gave me a biff between the shoulders that almost knocked me loose from my appetite.

"Hooray!" he yelped, as an introduction to the news he told me.

You'd have thought to watch him that him being picked out to play this part was a personal triumph for me.

"And what do you think Slim's cast for?" he asked me, gleeful.

"The heroine?" I suggested.

"As a measly policeman!" Shorty announced, gloating. "Gee! He's got a rotten part. He only appears twice, and all he's got to say is, 'I'll notify headquarters,' in one spot, and, 'Yes, sir,' in another."

"Not much of a part," I commented.

The new Booth puffed himself up and looked wise.

"Well, I'll tell you why that is, Al," he said. "Slim's a nice fellow and all like that, but he's got a sort of a—uh—superficial knowledge of the drama. I really don't think he could play a heavy part with real understanding."

"Maybe you're right," I said, stifling a laugh.

Shorty got a far-away look in his eyes and he smiled with satisfaction.

"The school-teacher's goin' to be there in the audience," he remarked.

"That ought to spur you on to your greatest dramatic achievement," I chuckled.

"It will."

If self-confidence made actors, Shorty Nolan would be at home on any stage.

Slim Evers' face showed his disappointment that evening when we all gathered in the cook shack for chow.

And Shorty showed lots of self-importance.

I don't know as anybody was particularly interested in what "For Love and Honor" was all about, but he explained everything about it and intimated that he was going to knock the audience dead.

"It's a awfully sad part I got," Shorty told us. "Believe me, that audience is going to cry."

"Aw, you couldn't make nobody cry—unless you started telling some of your jokes," Slim grumbled. He seemed a little bit sulky.

"I'll bet there won't be a dry eye in the house!" Shorty yapped.

"How much will you bet?" Slim demanded.

"Fifty dollars—even money!"

"That's a bet!"

I was appointed stakeholder on the spot and the money paid over.

"This gives me a big responsibility," I told them. "Let me understand just what the conditions are. How am I going to know whether or not there's a dry eye in the house? Am I supposed to go around with an eye-dropper and gather up sample tears?"

"I reckon Slim'll concede," Shorty told me, "that to expect every single person in the house to cry is unreasonable. Every audience's got a few hard-boiled folks in it that wouldn't cry if they saw *Little Eva* killed by a truck. I'm claiming that I can make a majority of the audience cry."

"Suits me," Slim agreed.

The whole thing being a ticklish thing to judge, I got the consent of both betters to have "Biffalo" Bull and "Red" Johns appointed judges with me to decide whether or not a majority of the audience cried over Shorty's performance.

Well, sir, the rehearsals began next day, and I was asked by the Widow Marston if I wouldn't sort of watch things in an advisory capacity, because for years I'd been a star in the two-a-day before bum health made me come out here to the open air of Montana. Of course, I agreed.

Now, then, there ain't much you have to know, there ain't much you'd care to know, about this play, except the fact that Shorty dies in the last act, just before the final curtain.

Shorty, you see, is the brother of a girl, and the son of parents who have got not one but many dirty deals from the villain. For three acts this villain piles one bit of cussedness after the other on top of these miserable folks, and then it's time for our hero to step in, him just having come back from Australia or Biloxi, Mississippi, or some such a place as that.

Just before the final curtain, our hero recovers some papers from the menace, which puts his sister and old parents in the clear, but the villain stabs him in the back, wounding him fatally.

Or something like that.

Anyway, it was terribly sad—or, terrible and sad.

I never before heard of a play that had so much murder, arson, thievery, skullduggery, and dirty-work-at-the-crossroads in it as this one had. Through it all, Shorty Nolan suffered horribly. I thought after the first rehearsal that the audience would wish after the show was over that Shorty had cashed in somewhere in the first act.

I'll say this for our Mr. Nolan that in all the rehearsals, while he did put up an amateurish performance, he certainly did throw his heart and a lot of pathos into his work. By the time the dress rehearsal was due he had actually developed into a pretty good tear-jerker.

The Widow Marston was delighted with him.

"I can say in advance, Mr. Crews," she told me, "that our little effort is going to be a great success, and for this we have Mr. Nolan to thank to a considerable degree. Every seat in the house is sold out. Think of it! And at four dollars a seat, too! Mr. Nolan himself sold twenty-two tickets and got us a lot of advertising."

"What kind of advertising?" I inquired.

"For the curtain," the widow woman explained. "It has space for advertisements all over it and Mr. Nolan got each space filled by different merchants just for this occasion. I think he's a wonderful man; and do you know, just between ourselves, I used to think he was a sort of clown and monkeyshine?"

"Oh, yes, Shorty's a wonderful little fellow," I told the old bat.

Well, the night before the big performance we had that dress rehearsal. All the other rehearsals had been gone through with an undressed stage and the curtain up. This one we carried out just as though it was the main performance.

It's good we did, too, because we discovered a serious oversight. That oversight was in not picking a definite spot where Shorty was to pass in his chips.

All through previous rehearsals he had been dying on almost any old spot, just so it was upstage center. At the end of this dress rehearsal, I noticed, just as he sank to the floor, that he was dying in a place where the curtain, when lowered, would land right on his middle. So I had him postpone dying for a minute until we picked a clear place.

"Think I'll mark that place so I don't gum up the works," the hero said, and

with a piece of chalk he marked a tiny cross on the boards.

"Yeah," I cracked, "a dying man don't want to do things by halves."

After that rehearsal we all pronounced the show ready to go. Everybody complimented Shorty on his acting, and he was tickled pink. Even Slim said something, telling him he was as good as *la Bernhardt.*

"Who's he?" the hero inquired.

"She was a famous star, too," Slim laughed.

To my surprise, Shorty didn't show the slightest sign of nervousness. Through a peep hole he watched the seats fill up and even standing room go, and he was filled with elation when he spotted the school-teacher, for whom his heart thumped so, sitting in the third row.

Well, sir, our show clicked off without a hitch for two acts.

"Looks like you might lose that bet," I remarked to Slim Evers once in the wings, from which place I was watching the performance.

"Why?" Slim asked.

"Because several times the customers out front were wiping their eyes with handkerchiefs," I informed him.

"Probably using the handkerchiefs to hide their smiles," Slim cackled.

At last we came toward the end of Act III. I looked out and saw from the expressions on the people's faces that it wouldn't take much more to touch off their weeping apparatus and maybe flood the cellar with salt water.

At the proper moment the dirty, sneaky villain plunged his cruel blade into poor Shorty's back, and our hero began to reel around.

I held my breath when I saw that he was going to die too near the footlights.

I breathed again, though, when I saw that he had remembered his chalk mark on the floor, for he did a few more reels in order to reel himself over the cross on the floor. Then he sagged down and after a couple of groans and heaves he died like an old, experienced trouper.

Gee! You could hear people gulping and snaffling all over the house.

Down came the curtain.

And Shorty yelled, "Ouch!"

I couldn't hardly believe my eyes. The pole at the lower end of the curtain was right across Shorty's middle, and it was a heavy pole, too. I couldn't understand it, because I had seen him die over the chalk mark on the floor.

While frantic efforts were made to get the curtain up again high enough to let him out of his trap, I heard a sudden roar of laughter sweep over the audience.

You'd have sworn a few minutes before that it was impossible for people to flop so fast and so completely from one emotion to another.

Long after I would have said it was long enough to laugh at such a small matter as a curtain coming down on a guy, roar after roar continued to come from the spectators. They just couldn't get over what they were laughing at.

When I peeped out on the apron before the curtain I saw why.

Shorty had had a wide choice of an advertisement out on that curtain front under which to get himself caught.

He could have died under the ad placed by Hannegan's Broadway Restaurant, which announced "Quick and sanitary service; bacon and eggs our specialty."

He could have got himself wedged under "Frederick Schultz, General Merchandise at Real Bargains."

Shorty could have picked "Palace Hotel, Hospitality at Reasonable Rates."

If he had died under "Angus MacKenzie for County Judge; Re-elect a Friend of All the People," it would have been O. K.

But the poor, unfortunate sap had to die under an advertisement—and one he had solicited for charity himself!—for

Seth Spradley's meat market, announcing all sorts of bargains in beef, veal, mutton, and sausages, and all under this heading in very big type:

THE BIGGEST HAM IN TOWN
FOR FOUR DOLLARS!

To all those folks who had paid four dollars a seat to see this show, the joke was instantaneous—and worth ten dollars!

Even the school-teacher laughed—and how she laughed!—but fortunately Shorty didn't see her.

Say, that little fellow was mad when he got to his feet behind the curtain!

He examined that chalk mark on the floor and then stood up.

"I know what happened," he said, after finding it smack under the curtain. "Somebody wiped out my cross and put a phony one down, a second one. They double crossed me."

He gave Slim Evers, who looked like the essence of innocence, a most savage look.

"If I ever find out who done it," Shorty growled on, "and if I can prove it on him, he won't have to look for his spot to die on. I'll select it for him."

Then Slim grinned and stepped up to me. He put both hands out toward me and said, "Pay me! If them folks out there—a majority of them—were weeping a minute ago, I can't hear right."

When Slim held out his hands I happened to see something on one of his fingers that made my eyes pop. He followed my gaze, and then, with a quick look at the unsuspecting Mr. Nolan, he quickly dropped that hand and on his trousers leg and cleaned off that finger.

What Slim cleaned off was a little smudge of chalk dust!

"If you don't mind," I said to him, "I'll wait till we get an opinion from the other two judges before paying off."

At that moment Biffalo Bull and Red Johns came backstage, still chuckling.

"Dawg-gone, Shorty, I laughed till I cried!" Biffalo yelled, starting his merriment all over again.

Shorty pricked up his ears. "Yeah? Did you?"

"I hope to tell you I did!"

"Anybody else laugh till they cried?"

"Anybody? Everybody! Boy, the tears was just streaming down their faces!"

"Would you say a majority of the audience laughed till they cried?" Shorty asked.

Biffalo looked at him, puzzled, and then saw his point. He turned to me and said: "Pay Shorty the stakes, Al. That was the bet. He didn't say, and Slim never said, he was to make them cry from either sorrow or amusement. He was to make them cry. Gosh! The joke's on Slim!"

Again Biffalo began to laugh, and he kept at it until the tears ran down his cheeks all over again.

Red and I agreed that it was Shorty's money.

"I sure didn't aim to win it this way," the little guy told me gloomily.

For an hour after that he was glum, but then, when he saw Red and me looking at him, he stared for a moment and then gave us the good, old Shorty Nolan grin.

"I guess you're right, Al," he said. "I guess I oughtn't to try to play tragedy." He studied a second. "I wonder how I'd do as a comedian?"

"Why do you wonder about that," Red asked him. "You are one!"

Stormy Dorn

By Cherry Wilson

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

THE runaway orphan, "Stormy," accompanying the famous Red Streak to a race for pure love of the horse, is flung off the train by a very brutal brakeman. He is picked up by old Trinidad Dorn, who tells the boy to call him "Dad." Stormy is ill received by Dad's brother and partner, Deem, who wars with Trinidad over the latter's "crazy" custom of buying watered land for the wild mustangs to range on. Stormy's presence adds to his grievance. Little Kerry, Deem's daughter, likes Stormy, who saves her life and wins Sultan, the black stallion, who would have killed her. But Stormy longs for Red Streak. The train is wrecked. Red Streak escapes and runs wild on the range before being rounded up by punchers hired by his owner. The horse breaks his neck in a fall. Stormy decides to stay with Trinidad and devote his life to him and the "wild boys." Sultan is tamed by Stormy. Deem's hatred of the boy and his anger against Trinidad for his love for the wild horses grow in intensity.

CHAPTER V.

THE DESTROYING ANGEL.

FIVE years have passed. In them, the wild horses—ranging the blue hills, free as the unwearying wind that blew up there—had multiplied unchecked. In them, the beef herds had increased on the range, until there was a real problem of range, one that every Bright Angel stockman looked to Trin Dorn to solve. For, long ago, foreseeing this day, when men would seek to replace the profitless mustangs with cattle, Trinidad had bought every bit of land in the hills that carried water, gaining control of thousands of acres of grazing land that was worthless without it.

Now, public sentiment demanded that he open this range to the public need, by leasing the water rights to the ranchers. While sentiment of another sort—rare in a materialistic age—gave him the solemn conviction that it was sacrilege to sacrifice the last refuge of the wild horses to the almighty dollar!

For five years he had held out, against neighbor, against brother. Now he was aged by the struggle. He wanted the good will of his fellow men. He wanted to be at peace with Deem, was worried by the rift between them. A rift which

Deem constantly widened by bickering over that range.

Slowly, but surely, in the five years past, the Flying Star—though still the big ranch of that region—had been running down. A condition due mostly to discord between the owners, a sharp drop in the beef market, and two excessively long, cold winters; but which Deem blamed entirely on Trinidad's "crazy whim" in holding Bright Angel Hills for worthless mustangs.

And for this, Deem blamed the one who upheld Trinidad, worked with him hand in glove. The one for whom he now felt five years cumulative hate—Stormy! Stormy, whom he had persistently given a bad name in the country, branding him a shiftless young ingrate—and with telling effect, as sentiment swung against Trinidad.

Stormy was, at nineteen, changed, yet strangely the same. He was man-sized, now, but with his dark, challenging eyes flashing the same dauntless spirit and pride as when, a homeless, stranded lad, they had blazed a trail straight to the heart of old Trinidad. Stormy's love for horses was the talk of the country.

"They say he plumb worships them wild mustangs," thus Bright Angel gossip ran. "An' that Sultan hoss an' him—they're brothers under the skin! Two of a kind, an' wild—both of 'em!"

But little did Sultan or Stormy care what folks said about them!

To-day, galloping in from the range, Stormy was only aware of spring in the air, of singing larks skimming the fragrant sage before him, of spring calves kicking up their heels on the green slopes, of his whole world to new and glorious life awakened, and the wild, aching joy of living. Also, more prosaically, he was aware that he was getting back an hour late for dinner, and was hungry as a grizzly.

But, lifting Sultan to a stop before the cook shack, he forgot even that. For "Dad" was leaning in the door, looking mighty tired and old—feeble, almost. All this last year Dad had been breaking fast. Heart failing him, Doc Christy said, and warned them all to look out for him. Doc said any strain or excitement might be fatal to him. He sure looked bad, now—all broke up over something!

"Dad," Stormy cried, leaping down, "you ain't sick?"

Dad started, as one who wakes from a bad dream. But seeing the boy, his face reflected the love that had grown every day of the five years for him.

"No, son," he said, with a weary grin. "Just down in the mouth, I reckon."

But he suffered Stormy to lead him to the bench beside the building, out of the sun, where they would be alone. And, heavily, as the worried boy sat down beside him, dinner forgotten, Dad made mention:

"Bronc Craig's here—in the house with Deem."

"Yeah?" Dislike, that had years behind it, swept Stormy's face. "What does Bronc want?"

Dad crossed his knees, and locked his hands about them. "Oh, nothin' much," he said, with fine sarcasm—"just our wild mustangs."

It was an old story. Bronc Craig had made many offers to "clean up" the "mustang-infested" range, finally soliciting the job free of all charge, munificently offering to take his profit out of their hides—and had considered himself lucky to escape with his own, by the time Trinidad got through with him. But this time——

"He's got a brand-new proposition," said Dad satirically. "A payin' proposition! Which no man in his senses can afford to refuse!"

"You didn't take it!" Stormy was completely deceived.

"Sure not—I ain't in my senses! But he went straight to Deem with it. They're havin' a pow-wow in there now. An'," Dad sighed deeply, "I'll sure have

a scrap on my hands when Deem comes out!"

Stormy knew it. It was a crime the way Deem badgered Dad, after what Doc said.

"What's Bronc's proposition?" he asked.

"One calculated to hit Deem hard!" the old fellow flamed. "He wants to pay me for the privilege of catchin' my mustangs! Give him a concession on 'em! Had the gall to offer me three dollars for every one he could catch alive. Says he's got a market for 'em. Says he can make a few thousand off 'em. Raised the ante to four a head, an' hinted he'd go higher. Every man has his price, Bronc says. Dang him! I know what his market is—with that packin' plant at Red Falls just startin' up! I told him no price on earth could make me a Judas like that. Reckon, I'm plumb hoss-crazy, son!"

Stormy's hand gripped Dad's hard. "There's a pair of us then."

"But," said Dad, with strange dread, as he returned the pressure, "Deem will fall for it! It means money for the Flyin' Star. It means the range they're all hollerin' for. Deem knows I wouldn't give a hootenany what was done with them hills, once the wild boys was gone!"

"They won't go!" Stormy's black eyes flashed.

But Dad did not speak for a long time. And, when he did, it was on a subject far removed from the mustangs.

"Stormy," he said huskily, "you've been a real son to me."

The boy's eyes filled. "I sure hope so. I'd hate to think I hadn't been—after all you've done for me. You took me in—a nobody! You've give me everything—been a real father to me!"

"That," said Dad slowly, "is what I mean to be. Son, I've been thinkin'—In the eyes of the law, you ain't got no claim on me, you ain't got even a right to the name Stormy Dorn! Now I want to protect you, in case anything happens to me."

"Nothing's goin' to happen!" The mere thought sent a pang quivering through Stormy's heart.

"I hope not," said Dad gravely. "But in case anything should—waal, I hate to think of the position you'd be in here, with Deem down on you. So I want to make you mine legal. Then, what I've got will go to you. I don't aim to put it off no longer. We're ridin' in to Red Coulee to-morrow, so I can start proceedin's to adopt you."

Adopt him! With bursting heart the boy tried to think what that would mean. Why, it meant—everything! All the things that had troubled him, growing up. He wouldn't be a maverick! He'd have a name of his own! Oh, how he wanted that! He would be the son of Trinidad Dorn. That's what he wanted—not what Dad had.

But he cried quickly, sincerely: "You'd better not, Dad! Deem would go wild."

"I ain't consultin' Deem," said old Dad, with a dry smile. "He's always been afraid I'd do it. That's the biggest thing he's had against you. It's always been his dream for Kerry to heir the Flyin' Star alone. But I figger there's plenty for both, an' Kerry wants I should do right by you. I talked this all over with her before her company came."

"Company?" echoed Stormy.

"Yeah," said Trinidad. "Bronc's girl come with him." And his heart sank at the boy's swift interest.

For, in the past five years, a new star had risen on the Western horizon. Cleo Craig—the champion cowgirl of the world! Bronc Craig's daughter, following her natural inheritance, had gone her father one better in the horse-breaking game! Not doing her stuff at Bronc's Cache Valley Ranch, nor around neighboring corrals for a day's wage, but in the rodeo ring, for real

money and national fame. Since she followed up the rodeos, she was not in the Bright Angel country much. Stormy had not met her as yet. But he had seen her take first money in every event at Cheyenne last fall, when she won her title, and had watched her career with interest. She was pretty, he thought, and plucky.

"But not in a class with Kerry!" Dad broke in, reading Stormy's thoughts jealously!

"I'll say not!" Stormy was intensely loyal to the girl, who, despite parental objections, had been a sister to him all his years at the Flying Star.

"Cleo," Dad went on, a little too earnestly, "is Bronc all over—but worse. He looks what he is, but she—Son, she's like that plant—the destroyin' angel! Innocent-lookin', but plumb fatal!"

"I'm warned," Stormy laughed. But, later, the warning would come back. Destroying Angel—Cleo Craig!

"I figger, son, that with you my heir—on equal footin' with Kerry—Deem'll have a lot more respect for you. The adoption will make Kerry your cousin. But some day I'm hopin', Stormy,"—and Dad's tremor showed how deep that hope—"that you'll git the law to make her a closer relation."

Blushing like a schoolboy, Stormy got up, and led Sultan to the watering trough. Dad's eyes, following him, were full of his own, old dream—that the two young folks he loved best would marry. The "wild boys" would be safe with Stormy and Kerry owning their sanctuary! Then, remembering that he was in for another battle with Deem, black dread engulfed him again.

But in his joy at Dad's plans for him, Stormy had forgotten Bronc's scheme until, standing with his hand on Sultan's shoulder, waiting for him to drink, he saw Deem and Bronc, still deep in their talk, leave the house, followed by Kerry Dorn and a stunning girl, stunningly dressed in riding clothes. From under his sombrero, Stormy watched the quartet, particularly the famous rodeo girl, whose skill and daring had placed her at the very pinnacle of her profession.

Slowly, the four moved to the hitching rail, where the visitors' horses were tethered. Here the Craigs mounted. And Deem, with an emphatic nod to Bronc, turned off toward the bunk house.

"To hunt dad up, an' hound him some more!" was the boy's hot thought.

Then Bronc and his daughter reined toward the trough. And, seeing Stormy there, Kerry walked leisurely over with them.

At seventeen, Kerry Dorn, with her sparkle and flash, her soft, bronze hair, and eyes like prairie violets, was surely in a class by herself. So it must only have been the glamour of fame that held Stormy's gaze on Cleo Craig! Though Cleo's dark beauty was enough to hold most men in itself. And in her white sombrero, cherry silk blouse, fringed skirt, beaded gauntlets, and rodeo scarf, she was a picture to stir the coldest heart.

A picture that Kerry felt entirely out of, in her plain orchid frock. She hung back, with strange diffidence, while Bronc—more hawkish than ever—did the honors.

"Howdy, Stormy!" As usual, Bronc was affable. But his old humiliation at the boy's hands still rankled in his tone, as, turning to his daughter he declared, with a sour grin:

"Cleo, here's a horse-breaker what beats us both ways from the deck! Stormy Dorn just looks a bad hoss in the eye, an'—Presto!—it eats out of his hand."

But Cleo Craig did not join in the laugh. She had heard with interest of Stormy Dorn and his phenomenal control over horses. Now she saw him—straight and tall and handsome, an in-

triguing hint of wildness about him—and she countered, with something warmer than interest:

"Why not? He's got a way with him—I can see that!"

Acutely conscious of Kerry's amusement, Stormy flushed.

"Bronc's got me a heap overrated, Miss Craig. I don't break horses—I make friends with them."

"Oh, he does!" Kerry was always as ready to praise Stormy as Deem was to run him down. "You've heard, Cleo, how he tamed Sultan? See! He rides him just with a hackamore. But Sultan isn't really broke. Nobody but Stormy can ride him."

Quickly, though with keen appreciation for the magnificent black, the rodeo girl took that up. "I'll bet I can ride him!"

Unconsciously, Stormy's eyes flashed over her horse—to the blood-flecked foam adrip on the savage Spanish bit, on down to the inch-long barbs of her silver Mexican spurs—then to Sultan, who had never felt the steel of spur or bit. And he said, with unconscious warmth:

"Not if I know it!"

Cleo's cheeks flamed. Her gaze met Stormy's. Steel struck steel—struck fire between them. Then, unexpectedly, she laughed—a laugh like herself, reckless, thrilling, and—hard! Excluding the others, she leaned toward him.

"I'll make you another bet!" she smiled, and against his will Stormy thrilled to the challenge deep in her dark, smoldering eyes. "I'll bet I do ride Sultan—and you know it!"

For a full moment she held his gaze. Which was longer—unhappily reflected the Flying Star girl—than Stormy had ever looked at another woman before!

Then she rode off with Bronc, and Stormy and Kerry were alone. Yet the challenge lingered, creating, like an unwelcome presence the first awkward silence that had ever fallen between them.

CHAPTER VI.

"I'LL HOLD GOD'S CORRAL FOR THE MUSTANGS!"

MUSICALLY, the water rippled in the trough, inviting Sultan to dip his muzzle deep again. Oddly, Stormy noticed how the sunbeams, falling on Kerry's hair, got tangled up and had to stay there. He wanted to thank her for backing Dad Dorn in what he was going to do for him. But while he framed the words, disrupting all constraint, drawing them together again, Deem's voice, hot and bitter, rushed to them from the direction of the cook shack.

"He's after Uncle Trin again, about the mustangs!" cried Kerry, her sweet face flooding with shame and pity. "Oh, why does he! Bronc started him! Bronc's got a new plan."

"Dad told me," said Stormy quietly, though his blood was leaping at Deem's ugly tone.

"I heard them say they were going over his head this time," Kerry worried, pushing the sun-dusted hair out of her eyes with that gesture so much a part of her. "Stormy, how can they?"

The boy's jaw set. "They can't, Kerry!"

He watched her then, running up to the house out of hearing, and he thought of how fine she was, siding with her uncle against her father, because she loved the wild horses on Bright Angel, believed they had a right to live, and was true to her principles. True blue, as she had always been! And when she had disappeared in the house, he led Sultan to the corral, and was turning him in, when faint, but piercing his heart, came a cry of agony!

He whirled, to see Dad reeling blindly toward the barn, his hands over his eyes, as if to shut out some awful sight—some picture Deem's voice was painting!

"Everybody knows it!" Deem was

flinging his fatal last word, as Stormy ran up. "Everybody says it's my duty to you, to my family, to the community, to do it! You've brought this on yourself, an'——"

"Deem," cried the ashy old man, "you wouldn't——"

"I swear I will!" His brother shouted at him. "You won't listen to reason. Trin, you're drivin' me to it! You can't buck the range alone!"

"He ain't alone!" struck in Stormy, as Dad fell against him, trembling, his lips moving but no sound coming from them. "Don't forget that! You got me to figure in on anything you do to Dad!"

"You!" jerked out Deem—then softly, gloatingly, as though struck by some gratifying additional compensation for the evil thing in his mind—"You won't be here, if I do that!"

Wildly old Trinidad threw up his hands, tore himself from Stormy's arms, and tottered toward the barn. Yet the boy continued to look his unspoken challenge at Deem Dorn, until the man wrenched from it with a curse, and rushed to the house.

Hurrying then to the barn, Stormy was in time to see Dad riding out, his face still working in that awful pain or grief. He did not stop him. Always after these bouts with Deem, Dad rode alone to the hills. It seemed to help him—to take the sting out of the mean things Deem said to him, give him the courage to stand more of them. But a queer chill shook the lad's heart, as Dad galloped by, with never a word for him. And the awful look on Dad's face stayed with him.

It stayed with him all that afternoon while, too disturbed to go back to work, he killed time any way he could, trying to think what Deem could possibly have said to upset Dad like that.

At six, the men rode in from the range. One glimpse of Stormy's face told them that something was wrong. More quietly than usual, they washed up and went to the cook shack. Here the boy joined them. Dad had not come back, and he was getting worried in earnest, too worried to eat, though he'd had nothing since breakfast. And when the crew returned to the bunk house to settle down to their nightly game of seven-up, Stormy walked the trails outside, watching, listening.

Twilight fell, and still no sign of Dad. Then it was dark, and the moon and the stars were up. Nervously, Stormy paced under the willows.

"Something's happened!" he told Kerry, when she slipped out to him. "He's never stayed this long before!"

She sought some ray of comfort but found none, in her own dark fear—with Doc Christy's warning returning to her. She could only say, her warm, strong, little hand in his: "Don't worry."

But, by ten o'clock, Stormy was wild with anxiety. Every one had gone to bed. The boys had left a light burning in the bunk house for him and Dad. A light still burned in Kerry's room, but the rest of the ranch house was black. And Stormy cursed Deem, who could sleep knowing Dad had not come back, not knowing what was keeping him out there in the dark!

Then, all was quiet, except for such sounds as deepened the quiet. The twitter of nesting birds in the willows. The far low of a range cow. Sultan's soft nicker. It was so still that he could have heard Dad coming far out on the range. But there was nothing to hear.

Suddenly, he could stand it no longer. And feverishly he saddled Sultan, a sense of tragedy strong upon him, so strong that he felt he ought to wake the boys before going. And he went in to do it, but, seeing how soundly they slept, knowing how tired they were, he had not the heart to. As he hesitated there in the middle of the room, Cherokee woke.

"What is it, Stormy?" The old foreman raised himself up.

In a few hurried words the boy told him. 'Dad left early this afternoon—after a row with Deem. He ain't got back. I'm goin' to hunt him."

Cherokee rolled out of his bunk. "I'll go along!"

"You come!" cried Stormy, in his fierce impatience. "I'm goin' now! I've waited too long!"

Once in the saddle, he gave Sultan his head, and at a mad gallop tore up the trail to the hills, up summit after summit, searching for Dad in the starlight. Up over everything but the jagged peaks and the starry sky, and still no trace of him. Then they were in wild horse country, which both knew as well as the home corral, and the search broadened.

Hour after hour, they hunted, climbing rocky hogbacks to scan surrounding country, scouring dark canyons and timbered slopes, searching in desperation, until Sultan dripped foam. Then on the very knoll where, a wondering lad, Stormy had seen his first wild horse, he now saw, with eyes of agony, a saddle horse—Dad's horse—loyally waiting for the dark form on the ground beside him to rise—a form that would never rise!

For Dad's rides were over!

Flinging himself down, gathering Dad in his arms, Stormy knew that, though Dad groaned faintly, and his dying eyes opened, focusing with terrible effort on the quivering face above him.

"Son," he whispered, "knowed you'd come. Been waitin'——"

Big and hot the boy's heart swelled in his breast.

"One of my spells," Dad gasped, "fell —— ." A tremor went through him. Stormy thought he was going, and sobbingly strained him to his breast, as though by sheer will to hold him.

"Deem—didn't mean—that!" Gentle, old Trinidad couldn't go without forgiving. "Just—bluffin'. He wouldn't make me—out—loco. Put me away—in a asylum! Not Trin—his own flesh an' blood——"

So this was what Deem had threatened! To send his own brother to an asylum! To have him declared insane, because of his love for the mustangs! This was what every one—land-mad stockmen—said Deem ought to do, what Deem said Dad was driving him to!

"Son," Dad struggled up in his arms, "Deem will put Bronc—wild boys——"

Understanding, the anguished boy vowed, "I won't let him!"

"Range trouble—bitter——" came the dying mutter. Then, with awful pain, "Son—son——"

Had new vision been granted Trinidad Dorn? Did he see what that course meant to Stormy? Was he trying to retract that vow? Or, was it regret, more bitter than death, that his dream for Stormy was dying with him? There is no telling.

For while that cry—"Son—son——" still throbbed on the night air, Dad Dorn was gone!"

High from the black crags rang down the shrill, wild, sweet, compelling call of a stallion. And the boy cried, with a sob that all but wrenched the living heart out of him:

"Dad, they're tellin' you good-by."

Later, he built a fire to guide Cherokee. Then he went to Dad. And, kneeling down, hands clutched to his aching breast, his eyes strained on the still face that was smoothed in lines of peace at last, he said:

"I'll hold God's Corral for the mustangs, dad!"

CHAPTER VII.

"I'M RIDIN' ON!"

ALREADY, but two weeks after Trinidad's death, Deem Dorn was planning to wipe out the mustangs. He was already making terms with local stockmen to lease that range to them once the legal red tape was unwound,

was buying cattle with every cent he could rake and scrape to put on it himself. For he meant to "spread-eagle"—ranch on a big scale—now that he had no partner to hold him down. Also, he was scouring the country for more men.

For to-day—pay day—most of the old Flying Star hands were quitting. These men who had served two masters and lost the one they loved, refused to serve the other. They felt that Deem had killed his brother by that threat, as surely as if he had put a knife in Dad's heart.

"I wouldn't work for him, if he was the last man on earth!" wrathily vowed old Cherokee, packing up in the bunk house with the rest. "Cain—that's what he is! Boys, Deem Dorn is a marked man! He hears his brother's blood cryin' up from the ground. Right now it looks out of his eyes—the curse of Cain!"

Sitting there on the edge of his bunk, staring off into space, while these old friends prepared to ride out of his life, Stormy heard, but contributed not a word. And that troubled Cherokee. He did not know what to make of Stormy. He'd been so strange since Trin "went West." Didn't say much, looked like a ghost—a ghost with a purpose! And he kept to himself, wouldn't give them a hint about what he meant to do, though they knew—as he must know—that he could not stay here.

Going out to where their saddled horses waited, the boys begged Stormy to go with them.

"I'll git you a job with me," promised Cherokee. "Come on—hit the trail with us, Stormy!'

Wildly, the boy longed to. But he could not. So, with a last, fervent handclasp, a fervent, last "So long!" these men who had taken him, a friendless lad, to their hearts, were forced to ride off, leaving him at the Flying Star, even more unhappy and alone than on the day he had come.

Once they were gone, he hurried back to make his own pack and go to the hard job to which he was pledged!

But there in the lonely bunk house, it was heartaches he packed. For he could not leave this rumpled, little sombrero—Dad's first gift to him. Not these little chaps that Cherokee had trimmed down for him. Not things like that! Though he was forced to leave out real necessities to make room for them. And everything brought fresh memories that tore his heart to pieces again.

This six-gun he was buckling on—"I don't want you just to be a good shot," Dad had said, when he gave it to him—"you've simply got to be the best!"

And Dad had made him shoot on foot and on horseback, until—he owed it to Dad to admit it—he was the best shot on the range.

The same with this lariat. Dad had kept him practising, until none of the boys could rope with him.

Tear-blind, he took down Dad's last gift—a .30-30 carbine. Then he tossed an unbroken box of shells for it in his pack, threw in his cartridge belt, and and straightened, ready to leave. The only home he had ever known. Nor did he cast a regretful glance behind. Dad's love had made it home. It had been misery since Dad had gone. For it was Deem's now. And it was smothering him to live under Deem Dorn's roof, killing him to eat Deem's bread. No, he could not get away fast enough!

But, outside, he turned toward the house. He must say good-by to Kerry. He stopped as though shot. Good-by to Kerry! To all she meant—the half of which he had not known till now. Tear the rainbow out of the sky!

Tight-lipped, he muttered: "I can't stand another good-by!"

And with a look of pain such as nothing had yet brought to his face, he swung back, walking with heavy steps

to the barn to get Sultan, grateful that one true friend was going with him.

Nearing the barn, he could hear men in there. Deem, he knew, and the Flying Star lawyer, who had come out to the ranch to-day to appraise Dad's estate. But, coming up to the open door, he saw two more. One was a stranger to him. The other was the county sheriff, Al Gaines, who he supposed had been impressed into helping out with the appraising. At any rate, he was not curious about what they were doing.

But they were curious, he noticed, about him. For they stopped talking and stared as, putting his pack and rifle down in the door, he headed for Sultan's stall. He noticed, too, Deem's dead-beat, cheated expression when he saw the pack. Deem would have liked to run him off. And, considering how religiously Deem had avoided him since that night, he was unprepared for what took place.

Emboldened by numbers, Deem planted himself in Stormy's path, and for the benefit of the listening men sarcastically drawled:

"Waal, looky who's here! All packed up, huh? Leavin' the old home! Sneakin' off without as much as a by-your-leave! That's gratitude for you!"

It bore out all these men had heard of Stormy, and they looked at him, as though he were the ingrate Deem made out.

"Of course, it's none of my business," continued Deem, in that injured tone. "You don't owe me nothing—but your keep for five years, an' the clothes on your back! But, if you'll overlook my natural curiosity—where do you think you're goin'?"

Fighting for self-control, the boy looked square into Deem Dorn's eyes, and saw there—what Cherokee had said was there—the curse of Cain! Suddenly all desire for vengeance passed out of his heart, and forever.

Coolly he said: "I'm ridin' on."

"Yeah—where?" Deem hoped it was out of the range—so far he would never see him again!

"Not far," Queerly, Stormy smiled into those accursed eyes. "I've got a job here."

Deem's face fell. "A job, huh?" And, goaded by that grin, he said, with the snarl of the beast that looked out of his eyes, the beast that had slain all the best of him: "Waal, it's high time! What's your job?"

"To ride Bright Angel Range!" the boy shot at him. "To stop any horse-huntin' yahoo that gets ambitious about Dad's mustangs!"

Tensely, the men pressed up. Some one breathed hard. After that first violent start, Deem Dorn might have been turned to stone.

Swiftly, in the shocked hush, Sheriff Gaines appraised Stormy. It was as though he foresaw the day when he needed to know the mettle of this boy. Mentally, he marked down all his hate for the Flying Star man, his reckless spirit betrayed in his eyes as he made that vow, and his confidence in showing his hand before the game was begun!

Then Stormy strode on. He took down his saddle from the peg, backed Sultan out of his stall, and was lifting the saddle to his back, when Deem came sinisterly to life.

"Not so fast! You ain't takin' that hoss!"

Stormy whirled, a dangerous fire ablaze in his eyes. "Why not?"

"Because," Deem dared, "he's my property!"

"You lie!" flashed Stormy. "He's mine! You an' Dad gave him to me! I'm takin' him, savvy? I'd like to see the hombre who could stop me!"

About to break into violent speech, Deem grimmed instead. And, grinning, he looked behind him.

"Gaines," he beckoned, "I reckon you're the hombre he wants to see. Better put a bug in his ear, an' save

yourself a job. He's tryin' to get away with the most valuable hoss on the ranch"

Heavily, Sheriff Al Gaines stepped up. He was a slow, ponderous tortoise of a man, who usually got there first, if only because his slow motions inclined his over-confident quarry to nap on the chase.

"Better not, kid," warned the officer gruffly. "Bad business—hoss stealin'. Many a hombre's swung for less!"

White with anger at the cowardly advantage Deem had taken of him—for he would not have dared dispute his right to Sultan had not the sheriff been there to back him—Stormy was far from beaten. He did not dream that Deem's act had been inspired by his own rash declaration, nor that the determination forming in his heart right then—and expressed in his whispered promise to Sultan, as he returned him to his stall: "I'll be back for you, boy. It won't be long!"—was right in line with Deem's perfect scheme to rid Bright Angel Range of him!

Unhindered, he picked up his saddle, pack and rifle, left the barn, and set out to walk to the mountains, burning blue in the distance, with heavy heart and heavy pack, as on that long-ago day he would have counted ties to Rawhide but for Dad.

The first steep, rough mile fagged him. The pack ropes cut into his shoulders, and his feet pained, for a cowboys' boots were never made for walking. Pausing to rest, he made up his mind to one thing—he would not be robbed of Sultan! Deem had stopped him this time, but the sheriff would not always be there! Once more—to-night—he would go back to the Flying Star!

With this decided, he found a safe spot off the trail, and cached his saddle. Then he climbed doggedly on, with anger, strongest of stimulants, upholding him. And while the sun was still an hour up, he threw his pack beside a mountain spring in a wild canyon, in the heart of the wild horse range he had sworn to guard, and where he would make his home.

Here he would live like the wild mustangs—off the land. Easy living—for he saw game sign all around, and, with a handful of salt and his rifle, he could live in any wilderness. But that did not worry him. He had lived on oats for Red Streak! He would live on nothing to keep faith with Dad!

Spreading his blankets under the tremulous willows, he set out with his rifle to hunt his supper. He scared a rabbit out of the brush, before he had gone a hundred yards, and put it to broil over his camp fire.

And while the water lapped the ferny banks, and the leaves whispered, and the fire crackled, and the sheltering hills kept austere silence, the boy, kneeling there to tend his meal, thought—sharp as the fire-gleam on his dark features—of all his miserable childhood. The searing scars of it were still on his soul, though the bodily scars were long gone. And he thought of what he might have been—must have been—but for Dad Dorn, who had taken him in, befriended, defended him, made a pal of him.

For that—if for no other reason—he would save Dad's "wild boys" from Deem. How? He did not know. Deem had a legal right to do anything with this land—with all that dwelt herein—even with him! For circumstances had made him a trespasser on the very land Dad had meant to give him. Deem would stop at nothing to open up this range. He would have the support of every Bright Angel man. They needed land.

"All right!" bitterly Stormy told the listening wild. "Let them hunt their own land! Anywhere—in another county, another State—just so they leave this alone. All the rest of the world is land!"

All the rest of the world, to Stormy,

was so much dust and stone. But these high miles of hill and vale were hallowed ground. And while he lived, the wild horses God had put on it would range it—a living memorial to Dad Dorn!

When the setting sun had tipped each spire and crag in fire, the weary boy crossed the hills to Siwash Bluff. He threw himself down in the crimson shadows, waiting for dark to return for Sultan, waiting beside the mound he and Dad had built over Red Streak. Often, in the years that had gone, Dad had sat here with him. They had always come up here to talk things out. And Stormy felt that Dad was with him now. Dad's spirit seemed to speak to him in the restless wind, to say: "You won't be lonesome, son—I'll keep you company. There's no trouble here. An' if folks bring trouble, I'll be with you!"

So long, he sat, and so silently, that a wild band fed up the opposite slope of the canyon, as unaware of him as he was of them. On they came, things of glory, their new spring coats glistening with the sheen of satin, their long manes and tails fluttering about them. They were feeding in nervous bites, jerking up their heads at every mouthful to listen. They fed on, until a stone rolled under a bare hoof, breaking the stillness, and Stormy saw them.

He saw them, thrilling, as wild horses ever thrilled him. Then his gaze fell on one, and a shock ran through him. Had lightning struck him, he could not have been more shocked. His starting eyes held stark amaze, then wonder—awe that set him trembling! Was he dreaming? Would he wake to find himself boy-sized again, wearing the little sombrero and chaps that were in his pack, and with Dad Dorn living! Was he mad—or what?

Then his whole soul was blinded by a sudden light. And, springing up, rapturously he cried:

"No dream about it! It is—sure as I live—it's that!"

The wild band was gone like a flash. But Stormy was not tired now, nor unhappy. He was so full of vital interest, of energy, that he could not contain himself, could not be idle a minute more. He would go get Sultan now. And, in a perfect transport of eagerness, he headed down the steep trail!

CHAPTER VIII.

"IT'S RED STREAK'S COLT!"

IT was midnight, dim and ghostly, when Stormy reached the Flying Star. Blackness shrouded every building. There was no sign of life astir. With fast-beating heart he paused before the barn to listen and make sure. And yet again, when he had slid the barn door back, for its creaking on the stillness sounded loud as thunder-claps. But all seemed safe, and he slipped within, groping to Sultan's stall. The horse knew his step, and greeted him with an eager whinney that brought tears of joy to Stormy's eyes. And he whispered, hugging that black head to his breast:

"I won't leave you again! Not for the sheriff—or any man!"

Then, warily, he led Sultan out, half-believing the big black knew the need for caution, so softly did his hoofbeats fall on plank and gravel. Down the drive, past bunk house, ranch house, deep in sleep. Down the curving road beneath the willows, keeping close watch back, and so not seeing the figure that ran from the deep gloom of the trees until Sultan plunged and snorted, and then he jerked about to see a hand on the horse's bridle. Instinctively, his own hand went to his gun. But it froze there, as Sultan stepped back, and, plain in the starlight, he saw his captor.

"Kerry!" he whispered, in startled gladness.

But there was no faintest reflection of his joy in her face. No look that he had ever seen on Kerry's face. Only a strange, set look that killed his joy.

"I've been watching," she said, in a cold, dead voice that wasn't Kerry's. "I was afraid you'd come like this."

"Like a thief in the night!" bitterly he defined. "I'm just takin' what is mine!"

More tightly she clasped the halter. "You can't take Sultan!"

Dully, he stared at her, trying to believe this was his own old, little comrade refusing him Sultan, turned against him.

"He's all I've got," tensely he said, in pain and protest. "You know how much I love him! You ask me to give him up—just because your father wants him!"

Surprisingly, she denied that. "I don't think he wants him! If he did, he'd have hidden him, or put some one to guard him. No, it isn't that!"

He stepped closer. "What is it, Kerry?"

"I think," she said, in that same low, steady tone, as though every word she uttered caused her pain and effort, "I think he hopes you'll take him!"

"Why?" he cried, amazed.

"So you will be a horse thief," unflinchingly she told him. "So you can't do—what you told them you were going to do up there!"

He saw it now—the trap Deem Dorn had set for him and baited with Sultan. When they found the horse gone, he would be charged with stealing him. The sheriff would believe him guilty. He would not only have to guard the mustangs, but stay in hiding. He would be a fugitive. Yet the prospect did not daunt him, nothing could, knowing that Kerry still cared enough for him to warn him.

"Bronc Craig's here!" she said swiftly, turning to watch the trail up to the house. "Dad's give him leave to round-up the mustangs! He's starting right in. They're hauling the timbers up tomorrow for a big corral in Spirit Gorge! When it's done, they plan to hold a big drive and trap every mustang. That's why dad wants to get you out of the way. He's afraid you'll stop them!"

Grimly Stormy vowed: "I will stop them!"

She saw his eyes burn in the night, and cried, her voice throbbing now with color and life: "How can you? One—against a hundred men!"

He did not know, he said. But the same Providence that had brought him to wild horse country would show him when the time came!

She shivered—not from the chill of the night wind swaying the roadside willows, but with presentiment. "Something is going to happen!" she cried. "Something terrible! I feel it coming!"

And suddenly she was clinging to him, sobbing like a child in his arms. "Oh, Stormy, you never even said good-by to me!"

He understood then, why she had been so strange to him. He had left her—like a stranger. "I—I didn't dare to say good-by!" he cried, wildly. "For fear I'd say more, Kerry—say things I didn't know until I was a stray again! Things I can't say—when I haven't even a name of my own!"

But he had said them all. And Kerry's eyes had more luster than heaven's stars—until they fell on Sultan—waiting, interestedly observing the strange behavior of humans—and she remembered.

"Oh, Stormy, I'm almost crazy! I know how you feel about the mustangs—about what you owe Uncle Trin. And I know how my father feels about that range. But how do you suppose I feel, with you two——"

"Stormy," Kerry cried, with a note of terror now, "dad's so changed! He hasn't been the same since Uncle Trin died. He's changed, even toward me—so intolerant! He can't stand to be crossed in the least thing! It can't be grief—grief don't make people mean. It—I don't know what it is!"

Stormy did! But he could not tell her. He could only say, "Don't worry, Kerry."

"How can I help it?" she demanded desperately, drawing back. "I think of you up there—cheated out of all Uncle Trin meant for you. You've been like a brother to me—dearer, for we've had to fight to be together. I—I love you, Stormy. And I love my father, too! And when I think of what may happen to you—to dad—if you defy him—promise me you won't take Sultan!"

But he could not, and was silent. And she pleaded: "Let me keep him, till it's safe for you to have him. I'll make dad give him to me. You know he will, if I ask him."

"I know," he said, slowly, "but I can't leave Sultan. As sure as I do, some one will try to ride him."

"I won't let Cleo ride him!" Her quick warmth thrilled him, as, in less degree, did memory of the mocking challenge in Cleo's eyes. "That girl's crazy about you! She can't fool me."

The boy grinned at the idea. "Why, she don't know me! She never spoke to me but that once."

"Well, she talks enough about you! She was raised within ten miles of me, but she never came to see me ten times in her life, till she met you! Now she keeps the road hot, and it's 'Stormy this' and 'Stormy that!'"

"She's likely keepin' tabs on me for her father, Kerry. An' it was Bronc I was thinkin' about. Sultan will fight any one who tries to ride him. That means Bronc will get another chance to break him. I'd rather kill him!"

Had she not promised to take care of him? Reproachfully, Kerry accused him, "You certainly don't trust me, Stormy!"

"Trust you!" His dark face was strained. "When I first came here, Dad Dorn said, 'Kerry's true as the North star!' Girl, you've always been that to me—an' more!"

"Then," was her quick appeal, "be guided by me!"

Wordlessly he laid the lead rope in her hand. But in the very act of relinquishing the one friend he had hoped would share his exile, a happy thought struck Stormy, and he seized Kerry's arms.

"You take care of Sultan," he whispered excitedly, "an' I'll give you the best horse you ever owned! A four-year-old—with thoroughbred blood! Red as fire! Proud as Lucifer! Fast as the wind! The like you never even seen in dreams!"

She felt his excitement, felt her own heart beat to it, stared up at him.

"Kerry," he asked breathlessly, "do you remember Red Streak? The race horse I was followin' here, when——"

"Of course, I do," she said wonderingly.

"Remember how he got away, an' ran with a wild band all one night an' day, an' was killed?"

As if she could forget anything as near to him as that! "Why, you showed me his grave one day!"

"Kerry," exultantly his eyes glowed, "I saw Red Streak to-night!"

"Anyhow," he qualified, at her low cry, "I saw the livin' image of him. He was leadin' a wild band. Only for Dad's keepin' folks off that range, he'd have been caught long ago. An' when them horse-hungry buzzards get a glimpse of him, they'll forget about the other mustangs! He's the kind riders go plumb crazy over! An' he's yours, Kerry.

"Kerry," whispered Stormy, in mad joy, "it's Red Streak's colt!"

It was! No man could see the red leader and doubt his parentage. And, in the next week, many saw him. For now the attention of Bright Angel Range was centered on the hills. And the solitudes were broken more frequently in that week than in all the years within the memory of the oldest mustang. Daily,

and in droves, stockmen rode the hills, scouting out this new grazing land, casting a possessive eye upon the grass and springs. And a few of them saw the red stallion, and spread the electrifying news that a son of the famous Red Streak was leading a wild band in Bright Angel Hills. For even those far glimpses marked his royal breed, set a fire in men's blood, assuring Bronc Craig of plenty of eager helpers in the great drive, for to the lucky man to rope and brand him would fall this rich prize. That man Bronc Craig resolved would be no other than himself. For he had seen the leader, and he was as fired as the rest.

All that week his men worked hard on the corral in Spirit Gorge, a mammoth corral, designed to hold a thousand horses. It was a stragetic point for such a trap, since into that gorge emptied every valley, ravine, and gulch. From unremembered ages the mountains had poured their waters into it, chiseling out of solid granite that long, deep, narrow gash. Now the wild horses would pour into it, and the living tide, stemmed by the dam Bronc was building, would be bottled and disposed of by him to a market too horrible to be even mentioned!

The sound of hammer and saw broke the hush up there. The wild horses shrank from every echoing blow, as if they knew it was their knell.

"I'll get that red stallion!" exulted Bronc to Deem, when the rancher rode up to see the completed work, the day before the round-up. "I'll get every thing on hoofs! I'll sure clean this range at one swoop, if——" Nervously, he broke off, his eyes darting up to that dark canyon rim.

"If what?" harshly prompted Deem.

"If that kid don't euchre me!" muttered Bronc.

"You make me sick!" Deem exploded, with the intolerance that worried Kerry. "Shut up about that kid! His talk was bluff. He sided with Trin to get him to make an heir of him. Catch him riskin' his neck for a few mustangs!"

"That," said Bronc bluntly, "is a fine line to hand out to most folks. But why fool yourself, or me? I know that kid's game. He's wild as a wolf howl in the hills. An' he's plumb dangerous!"

"He's got you buffaloed!" sneered Deem, furious. "But if he gets in my way, I'll smash him! You needn't worry, Bronc—he's gone. He wouldn't stick around here when there's nothing to be gained. He's left the country by this time!"

"You're crazy——" Bronc began, then leaping back, startled, as Deem Dorn, purple in the face, advanced on him.

"Crazy! You dare throw that up to me!"

"Don't be so touchy!" Bronc made hasty apology. "I mean, you're wrong, if you think he's gone. He's up here —has been all along—watchin' every move—missin' nothin' that's goin' on! I've felt him—watchin'! Felt his Injun eyes on me! It gives me the creeps, I tell you! I'm expectin' trouble to-morrow. He's got something up his sleeve to balk that drive!"

Deem Dorn's hot eyes flashed up to that high bluff—where the young guardian of the wild was watching, with the eternal vigilance of the red stallion —and cried, with a curse:

"Balk me—on my own land!" and he laughed—loud, long, and crazily, until the very rocks rang.

CHAPTER IX.

"THIS IS WILD HORSE COUNTRY!"

THAT night an army of men encamped in wild horse country. Every rider who could possibly do so had volunteered his services in the drive, not for the thrill of the chase alone, nor from interest in the range, but in the hope that he might rope the son of the famous race horse. And these men were

so placed that, at daybreak, they could attack simultaneously, from all points, routing the mustangs out of every nook and cranny, scouring the range of them.

"Clean as a hound's tooth!" Bronc Craig had guaranteed.

For every wild horse was to go—but one. And that one—the red stallion—was the toast of every camp fire that night.

That morning the dun leader, feeding on the high slopes of Gore Peak, far back in Bright Angel Hills, jerked up his head with a whistle of alarm as a blue grouse sailed across the sky, exquisitely pink in the sunrise, landing just beyond him. It was not the grouse that alarmed the wily leader, but whatever it was that had startled the bird into that long flight and sent it scurrying for cover under the blossoming buckbrush the instant that it landed!

Now, as the leader's shrill warning brought his mares and colts about him, they stood as one horse, looking, listening, quiveringly testing the breeze, instantly breaking into flight, as two riders topped the high rim, against the wind, and swooped down toward them.

Miles west, in Papoose Valley, a deer broke through the aspen grove where a pinto king stood guard—a winded doe, running with frightened eyes. After it, the imperious monarch sent his band, fleeing from the thing from which it fled, sending a peal of wild defiance ringing back.

On Thunder Mountain a wild band wheeled and vanished, as the morning breeze, heavy with the perfume of wild syringas, suddenly wafted the scent of man! A dislodged stone, far away and faintly heard, stampeded the band in Siwash Canyon.

Here, there, everywhere on the range, and all at the same time, the wild horses were warned. And warned, they took flight, instinctively, confidently—for what living thing was as fast as they? And what was there to fear, with all the green world to run in, and a hundred mountain fastnesses in which to hide?

But, as the day reached its noon, and always they found their way cut off, as ever more yelling riders popped from cover, they ran frantically! A bird's-eye view of Bright Angel Hills would have shown two score of wild bands flying in all directions, with straining riders in hot pursuit. Dad Dorn's "fuzztail pets" were being run to earth at last!

No experience had taught them the cruel craft, the trickery of man. And they needed none! Disaster was like a taint in their nostrils. This land where they had lived, and loved, and warred, held a nameless terror that had settled into every crevice like a fog. For when brave leaders—running between their bands and danger—suddenly streamed out ahead to guide them into some hidden canyon where they might elude pursuit, they collided with another band leaving that refuge in a frenzy that heightened their own, and, swinging with it, mingling with it, both bands were hazed in the general direction of Spirit Gorge.

Only this way was open. And, with wild cunning, they distrusted it, though heretofore they had been accustomed to run through it, and double back into the hills. Now, instinct warned them from it. Now, men drove them to it. And toward it they crashed, in ever-growing numbers. For every valley, ravine, and gulch, was pouring its wild horses toward that hidden dam—and doom. Down from the highest reaches, up from the valley, in from all sides, they came to swell that vast, racing tide.

They ran with necks outstretched, with nostrils flaring, with manes and tails streaming straight behind, like flags at half-mast! Belly to earth, they ran. Tiny colts, fleetest of all, outran their mothers. Behind them, urging them, came the daring leaders. Behind these came dozens of howling men. The horses ran, with foaming jaws and

flanks, with sobbing breaths—faster than any living thing. But to what avail? This race was not to the fleet. There was no place for the mustangs to go—but into that same eternal oblivion where vanished the buffalo.

For, suddenly, on a flowery, sweet, late May morning, man had risen against them! Man was taking the hills, their very lives, as by divine right, forgetting the divine statement that the sons of men are beasts themselves! For: "Yea, they have all one breath. So that man hath no preëminence over a beast!" A kindship which few man recognize, but, in their vanity, shout their eminence, proclaiming the believers "queer"—or crazy, as they had Dad Dorn!

Dad Dorn! Surely if his spirit dwelt here, it must flee these hills in horror!

And Stormy—who had sworn to save them—with what agony must he be hearing the thunder in the soil of God's Corral!

And what of Deem Dorn at this moment hearing, seeing, the consummation of his evil scheming? Did his brother's blood cry up to him from the ground—cry, in awful reproach, "Deem, you wouldn't——" and never, never, never, while his tormented life lasted, cry any other words!

On the "wild boys" ran, their dilated eyes on the dark portals of that gorge. And doom was in the atmosphere, as heavy and tangible as the dust they raised. A horse went down. It never rose. The avalanche rolled past.

"Hey" yelled one dusty rider, as the Buckhorn crew swung in behind. "Any of you spot that red colt, Lark?"

"No! Lark Hoyt yelled back. "Have you?"

"Not hide or hair! But he's got to be in there somewhere!"

In there somewhere! Somewhere in that wild welter of sorrels, blacks, grays, roans, calicos, buckskins, bays, and pintos! What eye keen enough to descry in that rolling sea the red stallion all craved—but which they would not get, because Stormy had promised him to the blue-eyed girl he loved!

Not Bronc Craig's, though he had a hawk's eye for prey. Though he sat his horse on a lofty point in the rock-slide at one side, his gaze darting through the living torrent pouring into Spirit Gorge. Not Deem Dorn's, reining up beside him, jubilant at the thorough fashion in which his range was being cleaned. Then all was wild uproar and confusion in which no eye could follow any horse.

For, though the dam had been built back from their sight, around a bend, in the narrowest part of the gorge, the mustangs knew, when they ran into the wings—jutting from the corral bars to the rock walls—that they were trapped! And they whirled, climbing over each other, fighting to get back, with wild cries, as though screaming to Dad Dorn to save them even yet! But they were pushed on, and around the bend, by the pressure of horses being crowded up behind, clogging the canyon.

"Close in on 'em!" yelled Bronc, plunging up.

Fifty men crowded the last mustangs in, yelling at the top of their lungs, waving their hats, terrifying even the fighting leaders back. And every man of them, avidly searching for the kernel of wheat in all that chaff, the prize for which they had ridden for hours like madmen, risking their lives, failed to note when the jam broke. Only Bronc Craig saw that the tangled mass of horses had straightened out, was in full flight around the bend!

"By hickory!" he yelled. "That ain't wild hoss nature! There's something wrong up ahead!"

With a strong hunch as to what was wrong, Bronc plunged furiously after the disappearing mustangs, with Deem neck-to-neck with him, and every rider lashing after Bronc tore around the bend, to see the dam he had built with

such care—down! The three men he had left to guard it were hanging limply, with red, exhausted, chagrined faces, to the remnants of the barrier they had been forced to demolish under threat of death—letting every wild horse escape, little the worse for this experience!

And, standing in the shelter of the rocks, covering him, covering all of them, with a carbine, Bronc saw the boy who had 'euchered" him! And his courage, never hardy, failed utterly before the flash in Stormy's eyes.

"Bronc,"—him, first, the boy addressed, in tone ominously steady and low—"this is just a warning. Next time it will be another story. There'd better be no next time, Bronc!"

"An' you,"—Stormy's eyes burned on the dumfounded, defeated men, seeming to single out each one of them—"you'd better prospect for more land. For you'll never get this range! Now—clear off it, an' stay off! This is wild horse country!"

Then, as his burning eyes fell on Deem Dorn, literally frothing at the mouth, Stormy repeated:

"This is wild horse country! Now an' forever—savvy, Deem?"

A ghastly, choking cry drew every eye to the Flying Star rancher. His face was livid. His heavy, red eyes were rolling, even his teeth were chattering, sending a chill of fear through every man. He reached for his gun, and, finding none, snarled thickly:

"Plug him! One of you with a gun —plug him!"

Laughing in his face, the boy turned, as if offering his back for a target. Then he walked around the turn, whither had vanished Dad Dorn's mustangs.

And Deem Dorn savagely spurred his faithful horse, tearing off for the Flying Star.

"Reckon Trin wasn't the only locoed member of that family!" Behind him, Lark Hoyt said gravely.

Allowed an old plainsman, nodding: "If Deem gits any wuss, he's goin' to hurt hisself—or some one else!"

It was that fear which made Bronc Craig tear after him. But, ride hard as he did, he did not overtake Deem until they had pounded into the home yard. And then he was relieved to see that Deem had himself in hand. There was nothing to show his tantrum, but his deadly pallor and a trembling through all his frame. But there was venom in his tone when, halting at the foot of the veranda, he said:

"Bronc, I'll fix that hound!"

A declaration that brought Cleo Craig —lolling in the hammock behind the vines—up in an instant, straining, with parted lips and hands at her breast, to hear Deem's every vengeful word.

"I'll put him out of the way for years! I'll jail him for stealin' Sultan!"

Bewildered, Bronc cast a swift glance at the corral where Sultan stood lonesomely, with his head over the bars, hearing, Bronc felt, with a superstitious qualm, and understanding what he heard. Then, looking hard at Deem, Craig blurted:

"You're crazy——" Flinging up a hand, as Deem sprang at him with an oath, "I mean," he amended quickly—"he ain't stole Sultan!"

"That hoss," Deem mastered himself, "will be gone to-night It won't be hard to convince Al Gaines that Stormy stole him. Late to-night you're takin' Sultan over to your Cache Valley Ranch, an' you'll hide him there until that young buck is behind the bars!"

Fear flickered over Bronc's face. "Now, Deem, see here——"

"You heard me!" Deem snapped. "That settles it!"

They stepped up on the veranda. The hammock was empty. Bronc noted it swinging, with vague surprise. Wouldn't think there was enough wind to swing a hammock like that. And, going in, he received another mild jolt, at finding his daughter at the Flying Star. He knew,

of course, that Cleo was coming to spend a week with Kerry, while he was winding up his business here. But he had the best of reasons not to look for her until to-morrow.

And when, less than an hour later, he saw her outside, dressed in her dazzling best—gorgeous as any Romany princess—bidding a bewitched Flying Star man saddle her horse, he hurried out.

"Where you goin'?" point-blank, he demanded.

"Riding," Cleo arched a pretty eyebrow at this unusual display of parental interest.

"Anywhere in particular?" he catechized.

"To the hills," she admitted, knowing he could see her direction from the Flying Star.

And that struck Bronc as queer, because, as he said: "The excitement's over up there."

Coolly she tucked a strand of glossy hair under her broad-brimmed hat. "But I'm worried about that red horse. You say nobody saw him to-day. And I want him. If he's half as good as folks make out, he'd be the sensation of the tracks. I want him for this summer's rodeos. The boys say he ranges on Thunder Mountain. So I thought I'd ride up, on the chance of seeing him, and likewise assure myself that he's still there."

He said no more. But when she started up the trail, she was surprised to see him in the saddle, falling in beside her.

"I've been ridin' all day," he growled, "but I reckon a few miles more won't kill me."

She laughed to hide her chagrin. "Why be a martyr? Something new, isn't it? You—chaperoning me!"

"Mebbe," suggested Bronc cunningly, "I want to see that red hoss, too."

She smiled brightly. "Yes," sweetly she said, "it must be the horse. For I'm sure you're not anxious to see Stormy Dorn!"

That shaft got under Bronc's skin. "Waal," he came right back, "I'm not so sure you ain't!"

He saw her color mount. He knew she was angry by the way she bit her full, red under lip, and, suddenly, he was angry, too. "You're daft about him!" he charged. "You've mooned around ever since you met him. You didn't put on that war paint to catch the red stallion!"

"Oh, don't be silly!" Cleo cried, angrily quirting her horse. "I missed the round-up. You told me it wasn't coming off until to-morrow! You knew very well that I wanted to see it! Now, don't grouch because I want to see that horse!"

But, a mile up in the foothills, she wheeled up in the trail and waited for him, entirely composed.

"You'll play yourself out," she said evenly. "And if you're going over home to-night——"

"So it was you in that hammock!" Bronc's jaw dropped.

She nodded, her black eyes straight ahead. "Deem Dorn's crazy, to plan a thing like that!"

"Reckon he is, Cleo. But it's plumb dangerous to suggest it!"

She looked full at him. "Are you going to help frame Stormy?"

"Reckon I am. I've got to! Anyhow, he's got it comin' to him! That move of his to-day set me back a couple of thousand. I've got to git him out of the way, before I can do anything with them mustangs. So keep a still tongue in your head, if you don't want to see you dad land behind the bars instead!"

Said Cleo, with a careless laugh: "That kind of publicity wouldn't do me any good."

With heartfelt relief, Bronc realized the truth in that. And he felt like a fool, riding herd on his daughter. He

might have known she could look out for herself. She always had! First, last, and all the time, she looked out for Cleo Craig. No—scandal never helped any one in the public eye. Trust Cleo to savvy that!

But, despite the long trip ahead of him to-night, he did not turn back. For they were near Thunder Mountain, which was the red stallion's range, and it was barely possible he would get a look at the horse they had all missed in the round-up.

"Though," he reminded Cleo, when they were actually on the mustang trail at the base of the mountain, "there ain't but one chance in a million of that. They'll be plumb edgy—chased all day that a way."

"We sure won't—ridin' tandem like this," she pointed out. "We'd just keep them ahead of us. Suppose we separate here and circle the mountain in opposite ways? Then if one of us does start them, the other will turn them back, and we'll both get to see them."

"Good idee," said Bronc, without a suspicion in the world.

And Cleo, riding on alone, smiled at how easily she had got rid of him. She frowned, too, remembering how he had read her mind. For she did want to see Stormy Dorn! Ever since their meeting, that wild, handsome lad had haunted her thoughts. And his indifference, his negligence in pressing the acquaintance, was a challenge she could not pass up. His coup to-day had heightened her admiration—made her eager to see him again. And, purely on impulse, she had decided to come. Whether a desire to warn him of Deem's plot had anything to do with it, Cleo did not know herself. What happened after they met was in the lap of the gods!

Nor had she any idea of finding him in this wilderness—just the other way around! If he was watching this range, as she had heard, he would see every one riding up here. Thunder Mountain was not only the red stallion's range, but the most sentinel peak around. The chances were all of Stormy's being in this vicinity. And Cleo's vanity convinced her that if he was here, and she were alone, he would ride out of concealment to talk to her.

So, riding as conspicuously as possible, showing herself on every high point, she climbed the mountain, over which the old solitude now reigned, and rode for an hour or more without being discovered. Then, seeing a wild height above from where she would be far more visible, she sent her horse scrambling up.

By the millionth chance, she rode out on a brink overlooking a narrow valley, thrust like a finger into the heart of the mountain. She was not seen, but she saw—with glittering triumph in her beautiful eyes giving her a momentary resemblance to Bronc—a man working with a horse down there! And the horse was the horse that had set a fire in the blood of every Bright Angel rider! And the man was the man who had aroused something warmer than interest in the heart of Cleo Craig!

To be continued in next week's issue of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE.

Ridin' Proud

By George Cory Franklin

Author of "Gun Fuss," etc.

I COMES wobblin' into the Tin Cup saloon as peaceable and contented as a steer in the alfalfa, only to get a jar that made me lean against the bar for support. There's Thad Rucker, the twenty-five-year-old son of old John Rucker, who's just come from El Paso because I've wired him that his father is sick and needs him, coolly pickin' a quarrel with "Snake" Keeler, the toughest two-gun slinger in the Blue Mountains. Thad had no more business startin' a row with Snake than I have tryin' to flirt—at least that was what I thought.

Thad's been away from the J R Ranch for five years. He's been buyin' and sellin' Mexican cattle on his own hook. He's six-feet-two and built like a top horse, heavy through the chest, with a slender body. Right now his head's thrown back and his big Stetson is on the back of his head, his hands in his pockets, and he's grinnin' at Snake like he's plumb amused.

"Why don't you draw one of them pea shooters you carry?" Thad is askin' Snake. "I haven't got a gun. Nobody would bother you. Here's a chance for you to add a notch to them others."

"Gr-r-r!" growls Snake.

I can't make out any words, just sounds like a plain growl. I'm gettin' myself squared around ready for action if Snake starts to draw, and I guess, mebbe, whatever notions of killin' has drifted into his narrow forehead is kinder stopped when he sees me. Folks who's seen me come in, knowin' I'm sort of a guardian for Thad, and not any too free and easy, slides to one side so the room is clear behind us both.

It's plumb quiet now, just so still you can hear the drip from a leaky keg behind the bar.

"You've got a reputation as a gunman here in Colorado," goes on Thad. "Down where I've been you wouldn't make an ordinary pickpocket."

Thad's moved around a little so he's between me and Snake, and I didn't see Snake throw his gun. The first thing I saw was Thad kick, and this old Colt Frontier of Snake's sails back over his head right toward me. It's such a plumb easy catch that I just grabbed it and stepped up toward the two. Before I can get to them, Thad's right fist comes up and gets Snake on the jaw. Just one lick, but it sounds like a mule had kicked another one in the ribs, and Snake loses all interest in the proceedin's.

Thad takes a good look at him, and then turns and walks calmly over to the bar and asks for a glass of root beer. Can you beat that? A he-man that's just called the toughest hombre on the Disappointment, kicked the gun over his head, and then knocked him for a row of snubbin' posts with one clean blow, and he orders root beer!

"Have a drink, Bart?" he asks me.

"Yes, only I don't want to shock my constitution with anything like that."

"Give Bart whatever he wants," Thad says, and we drink and go out to our horses.

"What got you on the peck?" I asks him, when we're joggin' along toward the J R.

"He started to bully a man who was doin' him no harm, and I couldn't stand it, so I stepped in."

"Did you happen to know who he was?"

"Sure. José and Hank told me."

"Now, look here, kid," I snorted, "just because you've been down on the border chasin' around with a lot of knife-throwin' peons, don't get careless or think that such fellows as Snake ain't to be taken serious. You'll never get a chance to do a trick like that one you did to-day with him again. Next time you see Snake he'll begin throwin' a gun on you first, and then he'll talk—when he's sure he's got you covered."

This danged cool, easy-movin' young feller looks at me as if I was an amusin' sort of a relic. "Bart," he says, "Snake ain't the worst man you've got on this range by a whole heck of a lot. If 'Red' Anson, the owner of the Diamond A, and I ever have a run-in, don't miss it. We've never liked each other and now I'm growed up, a scrap between us would be worth the price of admission."

Naturally, a man that's been foreman for old John Rucker since he moved across the range from Antelope Park has seen plenty of fights—guns, fists, knives—so I ain't bein' chased into my hole any by just hearin' Thad talk, but there's one thing I think he ought to know before he mixes it with Red Anson, that is, that Anson and Snake Keeler are plumb friendly. That Anson had become rich and powerful, while John Rucker had gone down as fast as Anson had gone up. So all the way to the ranch I'm busy explainin' how our herd has kept on dwindlin' away, and how old John has had to make one sacrifice and then another tryin' to hold on, hopin' for a good calf crop and fair prices to pull him out of the hole.

"The J R is in a bad way, boy," I told Thad, "and it's that has broke your father down more than his age. He can't stand goin' back to a little one-horse outfit, after once bein' the big man of the valley, but Anson keeps crowdin' in on us, and he always wins every argument about range or calves or anything else. I'm satisfied that Keeler has mavericked many a calf from us and put a Diamond A on it, but I can't prove it."

"What are the J R riders doin' while Snake is stealin' calves?" Thad wants to know. "Haven't you got any riders?"

"We've got some good men," I explained, "but they haven't got the right snap to 'em. You know how hard it is to get men to put in their best licks for a concern that's on the down grade. What we need more than anything else, boy, is some of the old frontier spirit like your dad had when we left Antelope Park because our nearest neighbor was only twenty miles away, and John felt he was bein' crowded. He was a hard man then, and Anson or any other man wouldn't have dared to impose on him, but it's different now, and the men don't seem to care whether we sink or swim.

"They'll do what they're told to in a sort of a way, but as for fightin' for us—oh, well, you know what I mean. I can't explain the difference between men just workin' for wages and workin' because the brand on their horses belongs to the snappiest, proudest spread on the range."

Seems like Thad was just the medicine old John needed, 'cause in three days he's able to sit on the porch of the old adobe ranch house and tell Thad everything that's happened. They're sittin' there talkin' one evenin' when I come through the house with the mail, and didn't hear me.

"I hated to send for you the worst way," old John was sayin', "but Bart and me is both gettin' along in years, and Anson is gettin' bolder all the time. I'm sure he knows all about this cattle stealin' that's been goin' on here, but the other cattlemen won't listen to me. They all think Red is straight. He's a director in the bank and president of the Cattlemen's Association. He always hangs up a nice prize for the boys at the rodeo, and gradually he's gettin' to be more powerful and popular all the time. Outside of Bart, even my own men are stuck on him; I couldn't prove a thing against him right now if I was to be put on a witness stand."

I didn't want 'em to talk without 'em knowin' I was there, so I walked on out with the mail. Thad pounced on a long brown envelope with an El Paso postmark first thing, and after he'd read that letter he got up and walked out toward the creek and I thought he was tryin' to figure out something about what we'd told him, so I didn't bother him.

"Bart," says old John, with the same expression in his eyes a mare has when she sees her colt outrun all the others playin' in the pasture, "there's goin' to be one heck of a ruckus on this range, but I'm bettin' Thad hands some of these crooks what's comin' to 'em before snow flies."

I thought that the reason why Thad tried to act so cheerful was because he hated to let the old man see how disappointed he was to find the ranch goin' down like it has, but I didn't think that he understood that the main cause of our poverty was because we couldn't keep men. Cowboys are like lumber jacks, miners, freighters. They'll go through fire for a leader, but he must be not only able to handle his job, he must also appeal to their love of the picturesque. They'll take all sorts of chances, suffer hardships, starve or die for the right sort of a man, and while those that have stayed with us are respectful to John and me, yet an old man like I am, no matter how good he was one time, can't inspire these young fellows with the fire they've got to have to compete with a man like Anson on the range.

The consequence is that we haven't branded half the calves we should for the past three years, and our steer crop has dwindled down till we have trouble to pay the same wages Anson pays, and there's no money left to make repairs around the ranch. The place is sure beginnin' to show how poor we are, and I know Thad is thinkin' about how it looked when he was a kid, and comparin' it with the way it looks now.

I turned my horse loose and went over toward the bunk house. I'd got close to the open window when I heard some of the conversation goin' on in the inside. José, our Mex horse wrangler is tellin' the boys his version of the run-in between Thad and Snake Keeler, and sure it's a funny story. It seems like the way José tells it, that Thad is out to make a grand-stand play to impress the natives how bad he is, and Snake just didn't want to hurt him. Accordin' to José, Thad is as yaller as a sheep-herder's dog, and no man with any respect for himself will stay on the J R now that Thad is goin' to be boss. I waited for some of the boys to say something, but it's all quiet, too danged quiet.

I know that it won't do for me to bust in tellin' 'em the truth, because they'd just think I was tryin' to smooth things over, and I'd do more harm than good, so I went on to my room mad clear through, and not half as confident about the outlook as John Rucker seemed to be.

Thad hangs around the house for a day or two till his outfit come from El Paso, and it seems to me he's makin' matters worse by payin' little or no attention to the riders. Instead of goin' to the bunk house and tellin' funny stories and makin' up to 'em, he just answers when they ask him a question, and offers no explanation. He sure ain't makin' no effort to get popular with the men.

When his saddle sack and things came, he saddled a gentle horse and went with me to look over the range. I saw our riders watchin' to see what sort of a horse he'd pick for his first range trip, and while there's no reason for him to ride a bad one, still I can't help but wish he'd taken some other horse than old Toby, just for the effect it would have.

I got a slant on him that day, though, that showed me how silly José's story was. We came to a bunch of cows, and Thad sees a slick-eared two-year-old that I hadn't noticed. He gives him a quick glance, jerks down his rope, catches that steer, and busts him in record time.

"Got a runnin' iron, Bart?" he asked me.

I'm ashamed to tell Thad that I ain't had any use for one for so long that I'd quit carryin' it. He grinned at me, which said plain enough that he understood, then he built a little fire and pulled a loose shoe off of Toby's left hind foot.

"I've heard that shoe clickin' for some time," he said. "Now I'll use it."

He put it in the fire, and when it was red hot he crossed two sticks through it and ran as pretty a JR on that dogie as I ever saw. The campaign to win back the J R Ranch began right then, and I knew, as much by Thad noticin' the loose shoe on Toby as by his usin' it for a runnin' iron, that John Rucker was right and that somebody was due for a surprise.

The men didn't see it, though, and I could tell by the way they acted that they'd all quit at the first excuse they got. They'd got the idea from José that Thad was yaller, and they didn't want to work for him, and he sure ain't doin' a thing to make 'em want to stay. He just walks past 'em with a curt nod, neither highbrow nor especially friendly. His actions said as plain as anything could: "I'm boss. If you want to talk to me, come where I am."

I was worried because it's only a month till round-up time, and if these men quit, goodness only knows where we'll get any more, and without 'em Red Anson and Snake Keeler will brand every calf their men can get their ropes on.

When the remuda comes into the corrals next mornin' Thad and me was watchin' 'em. It's then that he sees the palamino for the first time, and right off I was sorry I hadn't had that

horse killed before Thad got his eyes on him, 'cause there's no mistakin' what's in the boy's head.

"Gee, Bart, where'd he come from?" he gasps.

"He's out of Mornin' Glory, by Silvermane, that thoroughbred runnin' horse that was here in the valley the year before you went away," I explained, "and he's the worst horse we ever had on the ranch."

"What do you mean worst?" he snorts.

It sorta peeved me the way he acts, like the palamino ain't so many. "Well," I says, "nobody ain't ever set him to a finish yet, and he's a fighter—a killer, if he ever gets a chance."

"Right here is where one cocky yaller hoss gets rode aplenty," says Thad, and picks up a rope.

"Shorty" Calhoun, who's an old hand, come to where I was watchin' from the top of the corral. "You ain't goin' to let that conceited four-flusher ride the palamino, are you, Bart?"

That nettled me some more and, rememberin' the steer and the loose horseshoe, I did somthin' I don't often do except in a poker game—I bluffed. "You ain't got ten dollars you want to lose, have you?" I asked him.

"You mean that you'll bet ten dollars that young Rucker rides the palamino?" he says, hardly able to talk, he's so surprised.

"Not only rides him, but breaks him." I pushed the ante up a bit.

"You're gettin' so old you oughta put your money in a trust fund," says Shorty, and flashed a ten spot, which I immediately covered, thinkin' at the time that Shorty's got more sense than I have.

The palamino feels the same way about it, too, and was ready for a scrap. He won the first round by chargin' Thad the minute he steps into the corral. There was absolutely nuthin' for the boy to do but to climb the fence, and the sneer on the faces of the J R riders deepened.

Sittin' straddle of the fence, Thad nared Palamino's front feet with a slick backhand throw and dallied his rope around the top of one of the corral posts. One second Palamino is chargin' across the corral, as fierce-lookin' a outlaw as I ever saw, the next he's layin' on his back with his front feet in the air snubbed to a corral post, and Thad is rollin' him a smoke as unconcernedly as if catchin' killer horses is his best amusement.

I glanced around at the faces of the men. They looked a little surprised, but it's clear that they think Thad's just had a lotta good luck, and his easy manner is just some more grand-stand stuff. Thad opened the gate and shoved the rest of the horses out into the big corral, before he went for his saddle and hackamore.

In spite of Shorty's havin' bet that Thad couldn't ride Palamino, he's too good a sport not to be willin' to help, and I see him saddlin' Midnight, a big black that is one of the best hazin' horses on the ranch. "Caliope" Jones offers to help Thad put his saddle on the horse.

"Oh, no," says Thad, "I can handle him." And you'd 'a' thought he was puttin' a hackamore on a yearlin' colt, the way he slipped the nose piece over the savage jaws that kept snappin' at him till you could hear 'em click clear across the corral.

Anybody can see that this ain't goin' to be any ordinary bronc fight. There's a good chance for Thad to get killed or crushed. It's goin to be more than a case of just a wild bucker, too, cause there's clear murder flashin' from the eyes of the palamino, and his lips is drawn back over mean-lookin' white teeth that threaten to tear a man's arms off if he ever gets a chance.

The sneer was gone from the men's faces now. Somehow, you can't sneer

into the eyes of death, no matter if you have got contempt for the man that's goin' to tackle the job.

When Thad is ready, he lets Palamino up, saddled and blindfolded. Not havin' his sight don't bother Palamino much, cause he can still hear and smell and feel, and every time he thinks Thad is within reach he'll flash a hoof at him that, if it ever landed, would have given the horse the decision on a knockout.

Thad walked over and opened the gate. He saw Shorty sittin' on Midnight. "Thanks, Shorty," he says, "that's plumb nice of you."

A minute later he dodged as Palamino reared and struck with both front feet, and before the horse could gather himself to strike again, Thad was up on him and had jerked off the blind. Palamino was headed for the open gate, and he bucked straight through and out onto the open range, his long silver mane and tail standing up like plumes over as wicked a convulsion of horseflesh as anybody ever saw. Thad rocked back and forth, evidently expecting a long-drawn-out scrap, and not tiring himself by grippin.' I noticed as he went out the gate that Thad had the little end of a heavy quirt wrapped around his hand, which shows he's fixin' to protect himself in case the horse attempts to flop over backward and catch him underneath.

"Don't ride too close, Shorty," Thad cautioned. "He's plumb crazy now and he'll kill you or your horse if he gets a lick at you."

I sure got a lot of kick out of watchin' the faces of the men. At first they was afraid they was goin' to see a man killed, and then when they realized that it was goin' to be an even fight between a bad horse and a nervy, competent rider, their expressions changed from fear to interest, and then to wonder.

Palamino puts all he's got into that buck, and to say Thad rode him easy wouldn't be true. Anybody can see from the expression on Thad's face that he knows that he's tackled a man's job and is goin' to have to show all he's got of that precious little thing called grit, if he don't want to horn onto the heavenly range, pronto. The horse hasn't figured so far ahead. All he knows is that there's somebody sittin' up on top of the half circle he calls his back; that there's something twisted tight on his nose that keeps him from swingin' his head free as he'd like to and that a pair of bat-wing chaps keeps fannin' him every jump he makes.

The Disappointment River runs through the J R Ranch, and it's wide and deep' owin' to heavy rains along the San Miguel Range. About a hundred yards from the corral there's a straight cut bank four yards high, and at the foot of that bank there's a deep hole of swimmin' water.

Shorty does as good a job of circlin' as he can, in spite of the warnin' Thad had given him, and we know that the main thing Shorty is anxious about is to keep Palamino from buckin' over that high place into the water. Thad ain't doin' a thing but ride, and he looks like he's findin' that a plumb interestin' job, His face is white under the tan, and the blood spurts from his nose every time that thousand pounds of yellow brute hits the ground.

I can see it's just goin' to be a test of straight stayin' power, which one can last longer—a horse with a long line of racin' ancestry that's never been rode to a finish, or the boy. As a matter of cool judgment, I'd kissed my ten dollars good-by before the buckskin horse had made half a dozen jumps, but on the other hand I'm so proud to bet on a man who can ride like Thad does that I don't care about the ten spot. There ain't any manner of doubt but that I'm goin' to lose it when I see Thad begin to sway in the saddle. Seems like he's goin' groggy like a prize fighter who, no matter how game he is, has been rocked by a series of heavy blows that have

just drained his nerves of the power to act.

Shorty saw what was happenin', too, and when he jerked down his reata and got ready to fore foot the palamino, there wasn't a man watchin' but what felt relieved. Of course, catchin' a buckin' horse by his front feet ain't the easiest stunt ever pulled, and if Shorty does make a good throw and snares the horse, there's a lot of chances for broken bones hangin' over Thad's head.

While Shorty is gettin' a rope ready, Palamino bucks past him, headin' straight for the river, and it's then that we see Thad sort o' come to, like he'd got his second wind, and he motioned Shorty to keep out of it. The men just looked at me and wondered, and cussed when they saw that Thad won't take any advantage of the horse. It was as if he said "No, Shorty, we'll fight fair, and if he wins I won't have to be ashamed of givin' him all I had."

When we saw that unless a miracle happened the palamino was goin' to buck square over the bank into the river, we all started to run down there, and I was yellin' at Shorty, "Rope that horse, you danged fool! Don't pay any attention to what that crazy rider says, rope him!" And Shorty tried to, but missed, and we seen the palamino buck straight out over the bank, and as he goes I'll be durned if Thad don't lift his big sombrero high in his right hand and hold it there like he's acknowledgin' the cheers of a crowd, because he'd won!

Nobody can describe such a picture and do it justice. That boy sittin' up there on a horse that's too pretty for words, the silver mane and tail floatin' up around the rider, and him posin' like a rodeo actor, and all the time death is grinnin' up at him from that rollin' water below.

They went out of sight and Palamino came up swimming, the worst surprised horse that ever did an unexpected dive. Thad's workin' as fast as he can as the horse swims for the other shore where there's a shelving gravel bar, and as the palamino strikes shallow water, Thad throws him on his side, ties a front foot up by pullin' a loop he's got around that left leg, and slides off, holdin' Palamino's head up out of the water to keep him from drownin'.

Shorty hangs his spurs into Midnight and goes around by the bridge and up to where Thad is, in nuthin' flat, and the rest of the outfit looks like a bunch of parentheses holdin' a war dance, as we go bow-leggin' our way around to help. But Thad don't want any help. By the time we got around there he'd got Palamino fixed so that horse is learnin' he's done got him a boss. He'd rub the horse and pet him, and as long as Palamino let on that he liked it, Thad held his head up, but the second the horse tried to show any fight, souse, his head went down in a coupla feet of sandy water.

I'd never heard of breakin' a fightin' horse this way, but, believe me, there's one buckskin that's learnin' awful fast that it's better to let somebody else run things than it is to strangle, and there's a bunch of cowboys who have found out that they've got a real boss, too.

When Thad is satisfied that the palamino is willin' to call it a day, he lets him up, snubbed to Midnight and Thad still ridin' him, and we all went back to the corral.

Just then I happened to see José and, thinkin' of the way he'd talked about Thad, I concluded to fire him right then. Thad heard me tell him to go get his time, and he turned to me. He's sure a sight, with his clothes all sand soaked and stained with his own blood.

"What did you fire the Mex for Bart?" he asked me.

"For spreadin' the story around here that you didn't fight Snake Keeler fair," I snorts back at him, "and for makin' fun of you drinkin' root beer."

"It ain't often I interfere with a fore-

man," he explains, "and I wouldn't now if you was firin' him for doin' anything wrong about his work, but I don't want no man fired because of his opinion about me. If I can't win the respect of this outfit, then I ain't worth it. You ain't fired, José. We need every man we've got, and we need something more than just riders. We need men who want to sit in the fastest game that's ever been played on this range just because they love to fight."

That was the shortest political speech I ever heard, but if he'd talked for a week he couldn't have said any more.

That bunch of men walked into the cook house that night with a look in their eyes such as I hadn't seen for many a day, and I knew right then that, while Anson might win and finish up the job he'd started—that of sendin' the Ruckers out of that country broke—he'd know he'd been in a scrap, same as Palamino had when Thad had him down in the creek and was sousin' his head in the water.

If Thad had sent a declaration of war to Anson he couldn't have got results any quicker, either, 'cause while we're eatin' supper Bill Johnson came in from the north range camp with the news that some of Anson's men had that day hazed all the J R cattle south, and when he had tried to stop 'em they'd just laughed at him and told him to forget it, that old John was dyin' and that Bill ought to quit a sinkin' ship and go to work for a real cow outfit. If Bill had brought that news in four hours sooner, the men wouldn't have shown much interest, but now their faces just turned naturally to Thad, as if they're askin' him what next. He didn't say a word, and I knew he was mappin' out a play.

After supper he says: "Pick your top horses, boys."

That was all, but, say, the six men that followed Thad and me on the north range trail just as the sun was droppin' behind the hills meant business and we're just itchin' for a chance to revenge the insult to the J R. Thad was ridin' a big gray we called Cochise, and I must have dropped twenty years off my shoulders 'cause I felt young again and glad I was alive and able to follow a man who looked like Thad did on Cochise.

Johnson had seen the Diamond A camp as he came out, and he said Anson was there with eight or ten of his toughest men, Snake Keeler among 'em. It's clear that Anson thinks he'll bluff us so bad that we won't dare say a word, and will just drag our stuff down into the foothills and quit.

When we were a little piece from Anson's camp, Thad stopped. "I'm ridin' in there alone, boys," he says. "I know how you feel, and that you'd all like to get into this, but I'm goin' to give Anson a chance to be square. If he don't want to take it, he's got nobody to blame for what happens but himself."

He didn't tell us what to do, he didn't need to. With that, he reins Cochise toward where Anson and his men are sittin' around their camp fire, and jogs in as unconcerned as if this was an ordinary friendly cow camp, trailed his reins as he got off, and stood facin' where Anson and Keeler lay on their blankets. Thad's got his thumbs hooked in crossed belts, his hat is pushed back, and if he looks easy, a wild cat looks like a cottontail.

"When did you go to givin' orders to J R men, and what right have you to move range cattle before the round-up starts?" he demands.

Anson looks at him plumb insolent. It's clear that he's so sure of himself that he don't care how mad he makes Thad. "Did some of your old milk cows get disturbed?" Anson asked. "We cattlemen can't be bothered with small outfits when we're movin' a herd."

Anson's reply brings a haw-haw from his men, and Snake laughs louder than any of 'em.

"Don't try to be funny, Red," Thad snapped. "You're not that—you're just a joke. You and your two-gun slingers won't make a meal for my men."

"Your men!" howls Anson. "Say, kid, I could hire your whole measly, ragged layout away from you if I wanted 'em, which I don't."

"You're fooled again," Thad comes back again at him. "Money can't buy the kind of a spread I've got."

That seemed to stir up Anson and his men worse than anything Thad had said. Snake jumped up and dragged at his gun. He'd got it about half out of the holster when Thad shot it out of his grip with a gun held low in his left hand. His right is still restin' on the thumb hooked into his belt.

"You've had one run-in with me, Snake," says Thad. "I'd 'a' thought you'd 'a' known better than to try another."

Snake is goin' around nursin' his hand that's been stung by Thad's bullet, and cussin' a blue streak. Anson jumps up, and all his men with him. It's clear that they figure on gangin' this man that's got the nerve to walk into their camp and talk to 'em like Thad has. Anson has been cock of the walk on this range so long that he just can't get it into his head that anybody else counts at all.

"Before you get too hostile," Thad warns him, "I'm goin' to give you a chance. This camp is covered right now by a bunch of men faster than any of your killers, and they've got good reason to wipe your rotten outfit off the range. You might get me, but Bart and the boys have sure got you dead to rights, with them out there in the dark, and you here by the fire."

Nuthin' Thad could have said would have spliced our riders to him like that. If there was any of the old feelin' left among 'em it was wiped out when they heard Thad braggin' about how fast and loyal they was.

The Diamond A men looked around now for the first time and saw men on horseback sittin' back at the edge of the light, and I expect it looked to them like there was about twice as many of us as there was. Anson though, is watchin' Thad, and don't look around at anybody else. He takes a step toward Thad, and his face is purple, he's so mad.

"You can sneak in here and ambush a camp in the dark," he snarls, "but there'll come a day when me and you'll lock horns out in the open, and then we'll see."

"Just what I told Bart the other day," Thad chortled at him, "but in the meantime you fellers unbuckle your belts, pronto, before hot lead begins to sing." They gritted their teeth, took one more look at the circle of horsemen, and then did what he told 'em to do. Thad turned to me. "Bart," he orders, "send a man to bring in the Diamond A remuda. These men need their horses." And by all that's holy, if he don't make Anson and his men go put our cows back on the range they'd driven 'em off that day, and the J R riders go along to see that it's done right, too!

The sun has got around to shine again when Thad tells 'em he's satisfied. He calls Anson and Snake over to him.

"Your guns are still layin' where you dropped 'em last night," he tells 'em. "You can go."

Anson is cold white with rage now and he just can't resist handin' Thad one last jolt. "You think you've won a lot by makin' us put them cows back," he snarls, "but you seem to forget that I'm a director in the bank and there's some notes of your father's there that'll be due in a month. Your this year's crop won't near pay 'em. He's asked for an extension. I'll see that he don't get it."

"Me and you is agreed, Anson," says Thad, "that one day we mixes when there's nobody around to interfere. I

hope that day will come before you find out what I know."

That was all. Thad just reined Cochise away and we all followed him down the trail to the J R Ranch.

John Rucker was out in the yard for the first time in months when we rode back, and it seemed like the spirit that has hit our men has made him young again. His shoulders is throwed back and his eyes flashed with old-time pride as he sees us come shufflin' up to the corral and Thad swing down from Cochise and tell him that we've made Anson put our cows back on the range where they belong.

The next day Thad rode the palamino again. The horse bucked some, but he don't put the old snap into his fight, and Thad not only rides him, but he's got him so he'll turn with a hackamore. He rides him off to town, says he's got business to attend to, and he'll be back before night.

Along in the afternoon, the forest supervisor comes in. He'd been botherin' us because we didn't have cattle enough to use what range we'd applied for, and as soon as I saw him I knew that Anson had complained to him again. The officer was nice to John, but he told him that there was so much complaint about our holdin' range that was in excess of the number of cattle we was runnin' that unless we could fill up the range inside of thirty days he'd have to cancel our range rights and limit us to the foothills range, where the grass wasn't near as good. This was the blow we'd been dodgin' for a year, and now it looked like we couldn't get away from it any longer, 'cause the supervisor says he has orders from Washington to fill the ranges to their full quota of cattle.

While we're talkin' Thad comes joggin' in on the big yellow horse. John and me, we forget our troubles, just with lookin' at the picture him and that horse makes as they come across the short grass by the river and up toward the house where we're all three sittin' on the porch, the supervisor and John, and me.

Palamino's neck is arched, and his silver mane and tail sets him off till he's about as fancy a piece of horseflesh as ever tried to walk without touchin' the ground, while Thad's straight body just seems to fit in with every motion of the horse.

Thad left Palamino at the barn and came walkin' up the path to the house lookin' as confident as he used to be when the J R was the richest outfit on the Disappointment. John introduced him to the supervisor and told him about what we was up against. Thad listened to the whole story patient like, and when he had heard it all he got out a envelope and a pencil and did some figurin'. Then he sat lookin' off over the mountains to where the blue of the sky seemed to rest on the very top of the rocky peaks. Finally he turned to me.

"Bart," he says, "I saw some classy-lookin' cowboys in town to-day. We're goin' to need more men before the round-up is over. I wish you would go in and hire every man you can get."

That order sends a chill up my back. I wonder how we're goin' to pay the men we've got, but there's something in Thad's voice that makes me say, "All right," and go after my horse, and I went and did just what I wouldn't have thought of doin' without arguin' if John had told me to do it. I hired six men, and I knew when I did it that we didn't have the money to pay 'em, and couldn't get it, either, till after the round-up, and not then unless we got a heap more steers than I knew anything about on our range.

These new men were strangers. Nobody seems to know who they are or where they've come from, but there's no doubt about it, they're cowmen. You can tell a real one by the way he stands,

the motions he makes with his hands, even the look in his eyes. Each one has a good saddle horse and a pack horse carryin' a bed roll and a war bag, and they go right away after their stuff. Evidently they want to get to the ranch and get located. While I'm waitin' for them in the Tin Cup, Anson walks in and goes up to the barkeep.

"I heard there were some riders here lookin' for a job," he says.

"There was," says the barkeep, "but Bart there hired 'em a little bit ago."

One of the men came in and Anson went to him. "Lookin' for a job?" Anson asks.

"I was, said the rider, "but this man has just hired me."

"To do what?" Anson snorts. "Fix fences or plow a garden?"

The man's eyes narrowed a trifle and his hand dropped to his belt. "When I'm ridin' for an outfit, that's my outfit, sabe? Everybody that talks to me thinks always it's a good outfit, too." He turned to me. "What's our brand, boss?"

"We brand J R," I answered, plumb tickled at the hornet's nest Anson had stirred up.

The man stepped a little closer to Anson and quicker'n a flash he had Red by the nose and had give it a twist that must have hurt some. "There's my card," he said, in a low, quiet voice, "and my address is the J R Ranch."

Just then his partners came in and stood behind him. If Red had wanted to mix with the one man who'd pulled his nose, there was five good reasons why he wasn't goin' to do it, not then.

We rode to the ranch and I showed the men their bunks. I found that Thad had sent our entire crew out on a horse round-up, and when they came back the next day I felt better just to see a full crew on the ranch again, even though I couldn't see my way to pay 'em wages.

The new men fit in perfect with our old gang, and it's plain that whether we've got any cattle to round-up or not, we're sure goin' to be fixed to handle three times as many cattle as anybody in the valley has got. Even Anson don't need a crew as big as ours.

That day Anson's lawyer, an impudent duck that drives an automobile, rushed up to the ranch and wants to see Rucker.

"He's gone for a ride with his son," I told him.

"Don't lie to me, my man," he snorts. "I happen to know that John Rucker is confined to his bed."

A little later he sat up and look around like he didn't know what had hit him. "When I tell you that anybody has gone for a ride," I says, "don't call me a liar, and I'm foreman of the J R Ranch, so don't 'my man' me, either."

He still sat there. "Well, perhaps, since you're the foreman, you know why Rucker has applied for all the unused part of the range," he says.

So that was why Thad had sent me away the day before when he was talkin' to the supervisor! Huh, he didn't need to be so close-mouthed as all that. But what in heck does he want of more range and more riders when he ain't got cattle enough to fill up what we've got? Not that I said anything like that to this lawyer, though. What I did say was:

"Mr Rucker and his son have their own arrangements about business. When they come back I'll mention to them that they forgot to consult with you and your boss, Red Anson, about how many cattle they run on this range."

Gee, he got furious at that! "Since you know so much, probably you know that John Rucker has notes for large amounts at the bank. As attorney for the bank it is my business to know his plans," he snapped.

"Yeah, and as attorney for Red Anson you'd better be gettin' into that gas wagon of yours and be on your squeakin' way before I get mad and kick you off the place. I'll tell Mr. Rucker that

you was here, and that Red's worried because he couldn't figure out this application and sent you up to see if you couldn't get your long nose where it didn't belong, and that you got it punched instead. Now, git."

Thad and his father rode in toward evenin' and John sure looked like a different man. He slapped me on the back and insisted on throwin' his own saddle, says he feels like doin' a day's work. When I told him about the lawyer, he looked at Thad. "I guess I'll go to town to-morrow," he said.

Looks like old John is gettin' his fightin' spirit back. He hasn't been to town for six months, and then only because he had to go to see the banker. Things keep happenin' so fast and so unexpected that I can hardly keep track of 'em. While we're still talkin', and before John has gone in the house, a man rode up with a notice from the Cattlemen's Association that the round-up will begin next day, instead of the time that it had been set for.

"That's some more of Anson's work," I bawls. "He's tryin' to get the best of us by startin' to clean the range before we can get our men ready and show these new men the country that's to be rode."

"Don't weaken now, Bart," says old John. "You sure put up a good fight all alone. Now you've got a peach of a crew and plenty of saddle stock, we ought to get all the calves and steers that's comin' to us."

I went off to tell the boys to get ready to start in the mornin', and left Thad and his dad still talkin' on the porch. As I was walkin' down to the bunk house I heard old John tell the messenger to report back that we'd be on hand at the place they'd appointed, next mornin'.

I guess every cattleman that ever threw his leg over a horse loves a show, anyway. I never saw one yet but that paid a lot of attention to his appearance, and the Disappointment Cattlemen's Association sure got an eyeful the next day when the J R rolled in with two wagons, six horses on each one, and Thad ridin' at the head of as fine a lookin' lot of riders as ever the old-time ranch had turned out. Every man acted like he was pityin' the common run of men that had to work for any other outfit.

This was the first time that Thad and Anson had met since the mornin' after we made 'em put the cows back on the range, and I'm watchin close to see that neither Red nor Snake gets a chance to take any advantage of him. They look grumpy as a toe-pinched grizzly when they see the J R spread roll in, but, of course, Anson don't dare to pick a fuss now. Besides, he don't want a general row as bad as he did before we got this new crew. If these new men ain't able to keep up their end in a gun fight they sure belie their looks a heap.

My judgment had been wrong a lot on this mix-up, but here was one place I had it figured right. Anson intends to pick a row between him and Thad alone, with Snake in the background. If Thad beats Anson to a draw, Snake is to shoot Thad. It's a sort of team work that's common enough among a tricky class of cowmen and outlaws, and has been worked more than once; but, while I'm not as fast as I was one time, I decided that the first bad break Snake makes I'm goin' to drill him first and let him explain afterward.

The round-up sort of divides into two camps, with the newer ranchers and those that want favors from the bank hangin' around Anson, while the old-timers that had ranged cattle with John Rucker when he was the biggest owner on the river drifted around our wagon. When it came to electin' a round-up foreman the old-timers wanted Thad to run, but he wouldn't and I knew why. He didn't want any official strings on him in case he had to act for himself, so an Anson man was elected, and the

next mornin' we started to gather cattle; and whatever we'd stood for before, there wasn't any question about our gettin' our rights this time.

Everybody knows that it's like foolin' with nitro-glycerin. The least little difference of opinion may start a row that'll end in a massacre. The J R men are spoilin' for a scrap. Evidently, they remember all the things we've stood for before, and are itchin' for a chance to even up.

Thad does his work like any good cowman should and, aside from his not noticin' Anson or Snake any more than if he couldn't see 'em at all, nobody would have known how watchful he is. Anson gets sourer and meaner lookin' every day as he sees that we're gettin' all that belongs to us, and that Thad is fast becomin' the idol of every rider on the round-up.

It just don't seem possible that a fight can be put off any longer, and when one night José rides in from the ranch with a letter for Thad, and Thad sends our six new men to the ranch that night, I'm worried, 'cause while a lot of cowmen are friendly to Thad, still, they ain't under any obligations to go out and get killed for him. On the other hand, Anson has got a bad outfit that wants to see Thad cleaned out. He's interferin' with their plans a heap.

The mornin' of the first of September we brought our beef herd down into the main valley not far from the J R, and Thad and me was goin' through 'em for one last look for strays when Anson and ten or twelve men rode up.

"There's the steer I told you about," says Anson. "That's my steer," and he started to cut him out.

"Stop!" snaps Thad. "Don't you try any of that. If you've got a steer in here we'll find him, and we do our own cuttin!"

"Is that so?" sneers Anson, and started to ride in.

If we thought Thad was cool we changed our minds right then. He was ridin' the palamino. He's got him well broke by this time, and when he spurs him the big buckskin charges just like he used to before Thad conquered him, and he's pointed straight at Anson. Anson is goin' to get all the fight he wants, and is goin' to get it in bucketfuls, too. He sees what's bound to happen, and jerks his gun and snaps a shot from the hip.

I spurred in and knocked a gun from Snake's hand and spoiled the play they'd framed. Four more of my boys backed my hand with their guns drawn, and for any man in Anson's crowd to have made a crooked move would have meant death to the one who made it.

Thad never tried to pull his gun, even when Anson kept on shootin'. He just reined the buckskin straight at him and charged again and again. We saw then that Thad intended to ride Red down. He acted like Red wasn't worth treatin' serious enough to shoot, and twice Palamino hit Anson's horse square with his breast, knocked him over and jumped clear over man and horse. By the time Thad could stop Palamino and turn, Red was up and on again, but he didn't get a single chance to load his empty gun.

Finally he turned toward the open country and started to run, the palamino stretchin' out behind him like a greyhound, and it's then that we saw the greatest piece of cold-blooded ridin' we'd any of us ever seen. Thad laid his bridle reins over his saddle horn, loosened his feet, and leaped from the palamino straight at Red as he went dodgin' across the mesa. No man could have stood such a tackle as that, and the two went off into the grass, rollin' over one another, to finally lie still, with Thad on top.

Comin' across the meadow from the J R is a long string of Herefords bein'

trailed out onto the range by the six men Thad had sent in to the ranch. Pointin' the bunch is the man who had twisted Anson's nose, and opposite him, ridin' as proud as he used to ride years ago, is John Rucker. Nobody can figure it out, and me least of all.

Rucker comes over on a lope, and Thad walks back, draggin' Anson by the shirt collar. He's sure one badly manhandled tough, too.

"Everything all right, dad?" yells Thad.

"O. K." says John, with the glad ring in his voice I remembered so well. "I paid the notes, and the cattle came through without losin' one. We unloaded them this mornin', and here they are, three thousand as fine whitefaces as you ever saw. Bart, old boy, you're foreman now of a real outfit, and have got the men to handle 'em, too."

Of course, I see through it all quick enough now. Thad had made a heap of money durin' the trouble in Mexico, buyin' cattle cheap, and shippin' to the Denver and K C markets. When he'd sized things up at the J R—and not knowin' how our men was goin' to act—he'd sent for his own men; and it was them I'd hired, and the fellers had been posted not to give the play away. The brown envelope I'd brought Thad was a bill of sale for the three thousand cattle that was now grazin' the range he'd applied for.

When we finally rode into the big feed that two cooks was gettin' ready for us at John's orders, we was one proud bunch. We'd licked Anson and his whole crowd right on their own ground. The sneer on the faces of his paid friends when they'd seen Thad drag Red in like a dog drags a rat told Anson that his power was gone.

This new man I liked so well and I rode ahead of the best cow outfit west of the river, John rode next, and beside him Thad jogged along on the horse that had had a big hand in bringin' all this about—the Palamino.

POTTER'S CLAY IN CANADA

IN the picturesquely named town of Medicine Hat, Alberta, there is an industry which accounts for about seventy-five per cent of the pottery produced in Canada. This will come as a surprise to many, for in the popular mind Medicine Hat is usually connected principally with extremes in temperature.

It appears that in many parts of eastern Canada are found deposits of clay suitable for the manufacture of various kinds of pottery. In the Province of Saskatchewan especially there are found clays suitable for every known ceramic product, and with these resources within its own limits, the day is expected to come when Canada will be an exporter rather than an importer of potteries.

In the plant at Medicine Hat, which has been continually in operation for more than twelve years, crocks, churns, jugs, teapots, and similar wares are produced. At the present time one hundred hands are employed there.

A recent bulletin of the Canadian Pacific Railroad states that: "Attention is once more drawn to the great possibilities western Canada possesses for the development of a great pottery industry, to the foundation for a great and comprehensive activity which is being laid, and to the territory's keen ambitions in this regard."

In addition to the above, the Dominion possesses large resources of clay used in structural material, such as brick, tile, and sewer pipe. This industry is reported to be steadily growing.

Trail of the Buzzard

By Robert J. Horton

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

THE BUZZARD" robs the Pinola bank and kills the banker. Determined to capture the outlaw, Sheriff John Mack seeks the services of another outlaw, Alex Lamont, with whom he has a truce. Their conference at Seymore, bandit headquarters, is interrupted by an eavesdropping Mexican named José. He disappears, and later in a Mexican dive insults Lamont, who orders him to draw. José suggests they adjourn to the cabin where Lamont is a guest. José there announces that Lamont's hostesses, the beautiful Dolores and Señora Guerra, are his cousin and aunt. The sheriff is taken prisoner. The Buzzard arrives and later José appears. He tries to make such a deal for The Buzzard as Mack has with Lamont. The sheriff temporizes, and Lamont aids him to escape. The Buzzard and Lamont meet, fire, and The Buzzard is killed. José says The Buzzard is his father; the señora's brother-in-law. Lamont refuses Mack's offer of the reward for The Buzzard and claims release from his pledged truce. Mack accuses him of treachery and Lamont reminds him that he saved his life. The sheriff has nothing left to do but return to Bayneville.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN AFTERMATH.

ALL the way back to Bayneville—it took ten days of steady riding — Sheriff John Mack's conscience bothered him. The Pinola bank money had been recovered, and Alex Lamont had killed "The Buzzard"—as Mack wanted him to do, provided the bandit could not be captured—at his, Mack's, request. But had he?

It seemed to the sheriff that there were extenuating circumstances so far as his part in the affair was concerned. It was true that Lamont had not come right out with a definite promise to do the job. But, on the other hand, he had intimated that he might do it. Then there was the part José had played in taunting Lamont about The Buzzard's prowess with his weapon. That had

made Lamont mad. But if Mack had not gone up to the mountain town and put his proposition to Lamont and been overheard by José, The Buzzard's name would never have come up between the pair.

There always seemed to be a boomerang mixed up with the sheriff's reasonings. Yet the thing would have happened anyway, in all probability, because of The Buzzard's raid on Seymore. But—here it came again!—if John Mack had not made that long ride to find Lamont, The Buzzard might not have been attracted in that direction. For it was certain that after the official had started out on "The Weasel's" tip, the word had been passed by the Mexican friends of the outlaw. He must have known every step Mack took. Maybe The Weasel had himself given the information. Mack wouldn't put it past him, since he was always in need of money for gambling. The thought angered the sheriff.

But his anger quickly subsided before the hurt he felt at Lamont's refusal to accept the ten thousand dollars reward. "I don't kill men for money," he had declared. Yes, that hurt. He had put the blame squarely on Mack's head and demanded as his price the repudiation of the agreement that he would not work in Mack's territory if he broke loose again. And he had saved Mack's life by rescuing him from The Buzzard!

"Well, I sure stepped into a mess!" Mack snorted aloud. "Maybe I've just exchanged that Buzzard for another long rider almost as bad an' in some ways worse." He swore softly and pulled his hat brim down over his eyes, shading them from the glare of the inferno about him.

Desert—a universe of baked, yellow ground, gray sage, and mesquite, and cactus. And, far to northward, the black lava hills swimming in a leaden haze under the brazen sun. Heat and glare and grime and dust. Lamont would be a fool to leave his cool mountain retreat up in Seymore.

And there was the big point—the danger. Lamont might do that very thing. John Mack had seen that old dare-devil light of reckless adventure in Lamont's eyes when he shot The Buzzard down. Later, when they had talked about it, Lamont's manner had been stern and sinister. There had been a cold, hard look in his eyes, too. He had done what dictating was to be done, and the sheriff's conscience wriggled as he feared that Lamont was within his rights.

Oh, it *was* a mess! If Lamont went back on the trail of gun and outlawry, it would be his, John Mack's, fault! Anyway, so Mack thought.

Then he had an inspiration. The girl! Would she not have sufficient influence to prevent Lamont's taking any such step? If he loved her, she would. But Mack had seen Lamont flare at her in anger once and he had probably done so before. Lamont was the type that attracts women. The sheriff doubted if the man had it in him to stick to any one of them for good.

Such were John Mack's disturbed thoughts as he plodded northward across the blazing desert toward the black lava hills and Bayneville.

Meanwhile, in Seymore, there was being enacted a drama of conflicting passions.

The very morning on which John Mack left a clean-up of the town began. Thompson was a raging lion. He was infuriated, not so much because of the raid by The Buzzard's band of cutthroats, as because the outlaw had been aided by Mexicans and some of the white men who lived in the town itself.

The fight had been a veritable slaughter, with most of the raiders killed or wounded. The others had fled precipitately. Those of the town who were known to have aided the raiders were

speedily rounded up, taken to the down trail, and sent on their way with a volley of shots whistling over their heads as a warning never to come back.

Meanwhile, Lamont had gone quietly about making an investigation of his own. He was looking for José, or seeking word of him. So far as he could learn, the Mexican had not been seen to leave the valley. He had not been seen at all after his departure from the cabin. Lamont suspected that the man was hiding in the timber on the slopes and decided upon a ruse.

He started back to the cabin and met Thompson in the street.

"I've been looking for you," said Thompson, with a dark scowl.

"Yes?" drawled Lamont. Somehow, he felt irritated this day at the sight of the Combination proprietor. "You couldn't have been looking very hard, for I've been in plain sight all morning."

"I saw your sheriff friend off," said Thompson with a sarcastic smile. "What was your idea in bringing him in here? I've a right to ask that."

"I didn't bring him in here. Yes, you've a right to ask that. I didn't know he was coming, an' he wasn't sure he'd find me when he got here. He came of his own accord to see me on a certain piece of business which had nothing to do with this place or anybody in it."

"How do you think I'm goin' to believe that?" sneered Thompson.

"Because I'm telling it to you," Lamont flared angrily. "You'll believe it, or I'll cram it down your throat!"

Thompson stepped back, flushing angrily, a hot retort on his lips. But he held his tongue because the man before him was dangerous, and then again he might need him badly some time. "The only thing I'm afraid of," he said, "is that he'll come back up here with sheriffs an' men from half a dozen counties and rub the place off the map."

"I'll guarantee he'll not do that," Lamont snapped out.

Thompson pursed his lips. "Have you seen that Mexican—the flashy one called José?" he asked slowly.

"No, have you?"

Thompson shook his head. "But I'd like to. He was one of the leaders of that Buzzard crowd, I reckon. Said The Buzzard was his father after you'd bored him for keeps."

This Lamont considered thoughtfully. Of course, Thompson did not know as much about the Mexican as Lamont did. Lamont concluded it would not be wise to tell Thompson of the relationship between José and the Guerras. Naturally, it was Dolores Guerra who had drawn the young Mexican to Seymore. And now, in a brilliant mental flash, Lamont wondered if José would not have tried to carry the girl off if the raid had been successful. He conjectured whether some such scheme had not been the original plan of the raid!

"I'll tell you, Thompson," he said seriously. "That fellow might have lied when he said The Buzzard was his father—although I don't exactly think he did. There's more to this José than we suspect, an'——"

"He's after your girl," Thompson blurted.

"We'll leave her out of it," said Lamont curtly. "An' don't forget one thing, Thompson; she's not my girl in the sense you mean. I am not engaged to her. She's a good friend, an' so is the señora." He nodded impressively.

"An' you staying up there all spring an' to now?" scoffed Thompson.

Lamont leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Thompson, do you want trouble with me? Is that it?"

The other frowned heavily. "Well, let me tell you something. I've lived up here a long time—before you ever heard of the place, maybe. The boys sort of hold me responsible for things. You're a newcomer, you might say. Yes, you

are, for you've only been here three times that I know of. Now a sheriff comes up here to see you an' you seem sort of partial to this José; it's in the way you act, not in what you say. Just put yourself in my place. What am I to think?"

"I don't care what you think, but be careful what you say," Lamont replied. "You've made one or two cracks in a direction I don't like. Cut it! An' suppose you just leave this José to me."

Thompson's face cleared. He thought he understood. Lamont wanted to deal with the Mexican himself because the man was hanging around the girl. He smiled broadly, and Lamont could have hit him for that, but did not. "All right, I'll just do that little thing," he said. "Oh, I think you're all right, Lamont."

"For the second time, I'm telling you I don't give a hang what you think," Lamont retorted, and turned swiftly away. If he had looked back and seen the dark fires of suspicion flaming in Thompson's eyes, he would have done some tall thinking himself.

He rode to the cabin and entered swiftly. Dolores was up and came hurriedly into the front room. She stopped short as she saw the look on Lamont's face. Then she ran forward with a little cry and threw an arm—the one which was not bandaged—around his neck.

"Alex! You are going away! I see it in your eyes!"

He kissed her and drew away. "I must go for a time. You don't understand, Jackie girl. It is necessary after what has just happened."

"No, no—no!" she cried. "It is not necessary. I know!" She looked long into his eyes. "I can see it," she declared. "You are going back—back to —to that other. And you'll never come back. Never!"

"Oh, I'll come back," said Lamont easily. "Don't worry about that, an' don't worry about me. An' I must hurry."

He went into another room and returned shortly with a slicker pack. He was wearing two guns and dressed for the trail. Both the girl and Señora Guerra were in the front room. It was the señora who spoke.

"You must go, señor? Could you not wait for all the summer?"

"Oh, I probably won't be gone that long," said Lamont. "But it is necessary, señora—absolutely."

Again the girl approached him. Her eyes were great, dark wells of sorrow. "The señor does not care?" she said in a low voice.

"You mustn't call me 'señor.' Call me by my name." It was a subtle evasion of her question.

"When will you come back?" she asked. "You go so sudden."

"I can't tell when I'll be back. Maybe soon—in a few hours. Maybe days. You must not ask me these questions, Jackie; an' you mustn't worry about me."

The girl, seeing that no amount of pleading would avail, gave a little sob and ran to him again. She clung to him until he finally freed himself, picked up his pack, and thanked the señora for her hospitality, although he had paid well for it. Then he went out, followed by the women.

He secured the pack to the rear of his saddle, swung up on his mount, and with a sweep of his hat was on his way down the valley.

It had all been rather spectacular and dramatic. Any one who might have seen would have thought he was going away for some time; on a long journey, perhaps.

Lamont had seen to it that his departure was taken in this fashion. He rode down the valley below town for some distance. Then he turned abruptly to the left and into the timber. Now, his manner underwent a swift change. He

guided his horse carefully along a dim game path. His alert gaze flashed in all directions. He was "playing a hunch." It was nothing new for Lamont to play a hunch. In addition to this, he was fighting with himself—fighting the urge for the danger trail; for quick, rich hauls and swift pursuit; for wild, reckless adventure in wide-open towns; for blazing resorts where he could pit his skill at the green-topped tables with seasoned gamblers. It had been his life; a life into which he had been literally thrown by a father who did not care. When the father had died in a gun play, the son had carried on. And now he was going stale! The visit of John Mack and the result had heated the old wild blood in Lamont's veins.

He halted on a little spur where he had a view of the Guerra cabin. There he dismounted, smoked, rested, and waited until evening. And all the time he was fighting—fighting—— He rose and paced about; but he was always on the alert.

Sunset came and the first blue veils of the twilight drifted into the valley. "Ah!" The soft-voiced exclamations came involuntarily from Lamont's lips. He stood rigid, every muscle and nerve tensed.

Slipping down from the fringe of timber to the Guerra cabin was a figure he knew well. His hunch had proved to be correct. For the figure was that of José, the flashy one, with the air of bravado, and the voice of honey.

Lamont watched the Mexican enter the cabin by the rear door. He frowned, and his eyes flashed. Had they expected the man back? Had it been a game on the part of Señora Guerra? Now that his hunch had proved true, Lamont's original plan disintegrated. Why should he go down there? Why another scene, another leave-taking?

A flash of anger flamed in his eyes. After all, what did he care; why should he care?

José still was down there. Lamont's imagination visioned a scene—not at all like what was really taking place. But the old spirit had got the better of his judgment.

With a shrug of his shoulders, he threw off the fetters of restraint. He mounted swiftly, rode down out of the timber, and galloped down the valley to the down trail. The stars broke out, the wind freshened—and Lamont sung softly in Spanish as he rode.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN KERRVILLE.

MORE than one mining town took its toll of the mineral treasures hidden in the Wizards. Twenty miles south of Pinola, and higher in the mountains, Kerrville nestled in a wide gulch, with the yellow mine dumps spotting the green of the timbered slopes above it. This was a tough town, as any knowing the country would readily agree; as wide-open as a big pay roll and laxity of the law could make it. The great Consolidated had two big mines here. There were other mines. And from these mines came steady streams of gold and silver ores to be milled and shipped; and gold and silver coins to be spent.

Kerrville was one scant mile over the county line, and thus was one mile south of Sheriff John Mack's territory. It was a long way from the county seat in the south, the railway point to which the concentrated ores were hauled.

When Alex Lamont came down out of the high hills, breakfasted at the same small ranch where John Mack had stopped, slept during the heat of the day and after supper again took to the saddle, he headed straight for the Wizards in the northeast. He preferred night travel because it was more comfortable and he knew the country thoroughly.

He rode leisurely, sparing his horse, evidently enjoying himself. He hummed

to himself and gave every evidence of being possessed of good spirits. One spirit in particular which had been held in check now was bubbling over. And he was not a man to think backward.

Toward dawn he reached a water hole and he and his mount refreshed themselves. He opened the slicker pack. Soon coffee was boiling; bacon was crisping in the pan; biscuits were waiting to be warmed. The fire made a little red glow on the desert. He might have been followed by that simple flare. He did not care.

After he had eaten, he lay back on the saddle he had removed from his horse and smoked. There was a little feed about the water hole and his horse was grazing. Overhead the stars were dimming. In the east there was a faint gray veil. Rather cool, but the heat would come soon enough with the advent of the sun. He would have to ride all day across the burning wastes.

He dozed an hour while the desert gloried in the beauty of its sunrise. Then he rose and filled his canteen and water bag. He saddled, affixed the pack, canteen, and water bag. He rolled another cigarette, lit it while he gazed casually about. Next he mounted and rode into the sunrise.

All day he rode in the heat and glare. It affected him more than usual because he had been months in the cool mountains. He watered his horse from the supply in the bag, drank little but frequently from the canteen. And at sunset he came to another water hole and again prepared some food. Every movement the man made, every gesture, though it savored of languor, showed that he enjoyed himself.

He rested until midnight, smothering the red glow of the fire before lying down. At midnight he was off again under a canopy of stars with a three-quarter moon mounting the skies. Far ahead was a serrated shadow which marked the location of the Wizards.

He would be there at dawn.

Lamont rode faster now. He was whistling instead of humming, sitting straighter in the saddle, putting his mount to a faster pace. He was in the first rolling hills of the Wizards at sun-up, following a trail which led over the south shoulder of a high range. Soon he left the juniper and live oaks behind and was in the pines. At the first stream where there was a bit of meadow he halted. Here he remained until noon, while his horse feasted on the lucious grass and rested.

Lamont had timed his ride with an accuracy born of long experience. He was in the saddle again at noon, climbing stiffly now up a rough trail. Not many knew that trail, although it was not hard to find. A man following him, say, would have been able to keep on his track for he had left plenty of sign.

He halted only three times before reaching the top of the shoulder of the range. It had taken him more than three hours. His horse was soft from long pasturing and easy living in the mountain valley in the Antelopes.

After a short rest he started on the down trail. This wound around the shoulder of the range, into the heavy timber, and turned southeast. It was a harder, more dangerous trail than the one he had come up. In many places it was perilously steep. Lamont kept a sharp eye on it, leaning forward in the saddle, reining in now and then. Finally, on one of these halts he dismounted. He examined the uphill side of the trail carefully and grunted with satisfaction as he found what he apparently was looking for—a cleft in a wall of rock just wide enough for a horse to pass through. A dead pine, splintered by lightning, leaned almost directly over the cleft.

Lamont walked in a short distance and then hurried out. He was humming again; he swung lightly into the saddle and resumed his ride down the

trail. He showed less haste now. The sun was slanting well in the west. He cut his pace to a slow walk. The going was getting easier. As the sun sank behind the range he shook out his reins and rode faster.

At a little after twilight he jogged into Kerrville.

The main street was swarming with men; jostling, singing, walking four abreast with arms about each other's shoulders, kicking up clouds of dust; gathered in groups on the sidewalks; flocking in and out of two-score resorts; dropping lunch buckets to be picked up or kicked into the street; men in all manner of dress, from the muddy overalls and boots of the miners and muckers with their lamps on their caps, to sleek, chalk-faced men with round black hats, dark suits, black bow ties, and diamonds in their shirt fronts. Yellow beams of lamplight streamed from scores of windows and open doorways. Ore teams clanked by on their way to the stables. The bunting and other decorations still remained from the Fourth of July celebration, streaming or hanging from the false fronts of the buildings. Dogs barked and fought while onlookers cheered. Phonographs ground out their tunes to add to the din. Few women were about.

Lamont took all this in with his eyes glistening. He knew the signs. His heart leaped. Anything would go in Kerrville.

He made his way to the livery and turned over his horse with terse but amiable instructions as to the animal's care. He pressed a gold piece into the barnman's hand to make sure he would not forget and waited to note the stall where his mount was put. With a "So long!" for the man, he went back to the street of adventure.

First he sought a rooming house, obtained accommodations, and washed up. Then he visited a café and ate a hearty supper. He appeared to know the town. Seymore and John Mack were forgotten. He lighted a cigarette, threaded his way through the crowd—attesting to a prosperous camp—and entered a large refreshment and gambling place called The Green Parrot.

As soon as he was inside, he knew the reason why the place was so named; for in a big cage hanging over the mirror in the center of the back bar was a large green parrot. All such places had their mark of distinction, but this was something new. The presence of the parrot actually drew trade.

"Set 'em up for the house, boy," came the screeching voice of the bird.

And the crowd at the bar laughed and shouted words of encouragement.

"Don't ask for any change!"

Evidently the parrot had been taught a number of stock phrases which were in line with the nature of the place which was its home. It clucked and laughed insanely, and shrieked: "Back to the mines if you're broke!" This brought tremendous applause.

Lamont advanced to the bar and took a single drink of the vile, white contraband with the sting of a whiplash. His gaze roved over the scores of persons in the place but he saw no face he recognized. A satisfied look came into his eyes. It was just as well that he was not known. It was years since he had been in the town, but he had heard of the big boom.

He sauntered between the card tables to one of the roulette wheels in the rear. He dropped a five-dollar gold piece on the red for a starter and lost. He put down a ten-dollar piece and the black won again. He bet a twenty next, and this time the ball rolled into a red number. The croupier immediately shoved a stack of twenty silver dollars across to him.

"I'll take mine in gold," drawled Lamont. "That's what I bet."

The croupier looked at him sharply but said nothing. He drew back the

silver dollars and slid a twenty-dollar gold piece across.

"That's the stuff, son," boomed a big, black-bearded man directly across the table from Lamont. "You tell him."

"Tell him what?" asked Lamont sharply.

"Why—tell him——" The other's words died away and his face darkened. A silence had fallen over players and spectators alike. It was a situation to Lamont's liking. He was in town for excitement. "Tell him anything you please, but don't try to ride me, boy."

"Then you leave my horse alone," Lamont snapped.

"Young feller, if you open your trap again, I'll give you an earmark with a slug of lead!" said the big man savagely.

"Which ear?" Lamont inquired calmly.

The other's right hand left the table like a flash, went down—and hung there motionless.

None had seen Lamont draw, but all heard him speak, as he tapped the table with his gun barrel for emphasis. "Now listen, big boy: I've got a tongue an' teeth an' mouth that were given to me to talk with, an' I didn't get any instruction book with 'em to tell me when to talk an' when not to talk. An' I'm not taking any lessons from you!"

"No fighting, gentlemen!" screamed the parrot.

Lamont laughed. "I reckon that fool bird pulled that one just at the right time, for once. Tell you what I'll do, big boy." At the last two words the man's face became black and his eyes blazed with greater ferocity than ever. By this time there was not a sound in the room and Lamont sensed that he was up against a notorious character who enjoyed the reputation of being a formidable gunman.

"You'll lose your luck next time," snarled the man across the table.

"I never depend on luck to any great extent," said Lamont coldly. "But I'll make you a proposition. Let one of these gentlemen take your gun an' lay it on the black in front of you. I'll lay mine on the red in front of me. We'll let his nibs there twirl his wheel and spin the ball. If it drops in a black pocket, you can go for your gun first; if it drops in a red pocket I'll go for my gun first—which means we'll go together, for I know your breed. Only, I won't give you an earmark. I'll probably take your right thumb for a souvenir!"

The big man was biting his upper lip. He hesitated. Then a light flickered in his eyes.

"Bring that right hand up—empty!"

Lamont's command cut through the place with a metallic ring. His gun was tipped on a line with the big man's eyes. The hand went out and came up slowly, holding no weapon.

Lamont sheathed his gun and gathered up his money. "I reckon this camp isn't so raw it'll stand for any shooting in the back from a man who's been beaten to it fair an' square," he drawled. Then he turned abruptly and left the table.

"Set 'em up for the house, boy!" screeched the parrot.

The crowd laughed and the tension was broken. And "Big Black" Evans, leaning on the table and breathing hard, knew that, with that laugh, he was broken, too!

CHAPTER XV.

A DEPOSIT AND——

IGNORING the stares directed at him, Lamont sauntered back among the tables, and took a place which was immediately made for him at the bar. Across the bar, a short distance above him, a thick-set man, gray-eyed, with a square jaw and close-clipped mustache, was talking with some others. Lamont recognized him as the proprietor.

The man shot him a keen glance of appraisal and resumed his conversation. Lamont gave his order and, without appearing to do so, strained his ears to listen.

"Yes, they got him," the proprietor was saying. "Some place up in the Antelopes. Shot him down cold—in the back, I suppose, for that's the only way they'd ever get him. Couple of his men beat it over here. Dead for sleep an' horses lookin' like rags."

Lamont raised his glass and called for beer.

"Well, he was a bad one," said one of the men. "He was a buzzard, all right. Well named. That was a slick job at Pinola."

"Slick nothing," sneered the resort-keeper. "An' then shot that banker in the back. Well, he might have deserved it—letting a no-good, rotten outlaw put it over on him like that all alone. I thought The Buzzard might drift in here to turn a trick some time. I wish he had tried it."

There was a low, flattering laugh at this. "Guess you'd have showed him, eh, Mike?" said one.

"Well, they say I steal my money over the tables, an' maybe I do; but I'd like to see any holdup rat sneak in here an' try to take some of it away from me," blustered the man called Mike. His chest swelled and he thrust out his chin. "I've fooled 'em for twenty years, an' I'll fool 'em for twenty more."

"Don't ask for any change," crooned the parrot.

"Give us a drink," the man Mike ordered his bartender. "No, boys, if I steal mine, I steal it right out where everybody can see it." Then he winked and grinned. "But they don't always know just how it's done. There's plenty in the old safe, if they can get it," he added, pouring himself a drink.

Lamont's eyes were gleaming as he raised his glass. He looked at the man Mike as he finished half of his drink and happened to catch the proprietor's eye, slightly bloodshot.

"You tried to start something in here to-night," the latter said with a scowl. "Don't do it again."

"As a matter of fact, I didn't start anything," Lamont drawled; "but I came near finishing it."

"Just as bad," growled Mike. "You take a tip from me an' lay off that Big Black Evans. He's cruel medicine."

"So that's his name," Lamont remarked lightly. "That's almost too hard-sounding for him. Wouldn't surprise me if the boys called him 'Blackie' from now on."

Mike puckered his brows and nodded in an attempt to appear wise. "You're inviting it, boy. Just keep on handing out your bids an' you'll get it plenty. I'm tellin' you for your own good."

Lamont drew a bill from an inside pocket and flipped it on the bar. "Give me another of those almost beers an' punch that ticket," he told the bartender. He did not look at the proprietor.

The bartender served the drink, took up the bill, and turned to the ancient cash register. He stood still a few moments and looked around at Lamont.

"What's the matter, Jerry?" demanded Mike. "Does it look queer? Hand it to me."

"It's got too many naughts on it," said Jerry, giving the proprietor the bank note.

The man Mike looked at it and then at Lamont. He turned it over and examined it closely. "That's all right," he decided. "I've got lots of 'em. You can't stop me with a thousand-dollar bill, mister. I'll get it out of the safe, Jerry."

Lamont watched the man go into the little office in front. The door was left open and by means of the long mirror behind the bar Lamont saw the desk in front, near the door leading into the room itself, and saw Mike kneeling by the safe, which was against the front

wall to the left of the desk. He averted his gaze and when the proprietor came out with the change he seemed to be admiring the parrot.

"I hope he doesn't spring that one about not asking for any change," he remarked.

The proprietor smiled cordially. It had been a long time since he had had a thousand-dollar bill thrown at him, and he liked the sensation and the impression it made on the crowd at the bar. Everybody was watching as he counted out the bills.

"One hard an' two soft, Jerry? That's two dollars, all told. Here you are, mister. I know you like big ones like myself. Here's five hundred an' four centuries—nine hundred—an' fifty, seventy, ninety, ninety-five, ninety-six, ninety-seven, ninety-eight. Count 'em an' make sure." He smiled proudly. Good customer, this!

"I'll take your word for it; I'm not blind," said Lamont as he pocketed the roll.

"Set 'em up for the house, boy," shrilled the parrot.

"For once I'm going to take that fool bird's advice," said Lamont. "Sling 'em around, barkeep!"

The proprietor beamed and hiccuped. "That's a great bird," he confided, honoring Lamont by taking his position in front of him. "Nobody knows how old he is, but he's brought me in enough to pay for his feed." He laughed harshly. "Stranger here?" he asked.

"I was, but now I'm not," Lamont retorted.

There was a general laugh. "We'll say you're not," came from several as the bottles passed quickly from hand to hand.

Lamont peeled off a hundred-dollar bill and handed it to Jerry. "Don't forget yourself," he cautioned.

"You better give us a toast, mister," the proprietor suggested.

"Sure," smiled Lamont, as he raised his glass. "Here's to Blackie Evans!"

For a moment those about him hesitated, then they tipped their glasses and looked at each other with a grin. Big Black Evans' monicker had been changed with the toast. They looked about the room, but he had gone out.

Lamont gathered his change, thrust it in a pocket, and stepped back from the bar. "I'll be taking a stroll," he said. "Glad to have met you gentlemen. So long."

"So long," boomed the proprietor. "Don't forget to come back, mister. You can get anything you want here."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Lamont.

"Now, gents, there's a sport!" Mike exclaimed thickly as his liberal patron went out the door. "That feller'll do well wherever he is."

As Lamont walked up the street, a peculiar smile flickered on his lips. "Steals it in plain sight," he murmured; and the smile faded. He went to the livery where he obtained his slicker pack from the barn office. This he carried across the street to his room.

Next he opened the pack and took a quick inventory of what it contained. He took out his second gun and thrust it into his waistband, where it could not be seen under his coat. He did not wish to leave it in the room, although he had considered it safe in the livery.

He went down to a grocery store and made a few purchases and then he secured a number of cold-beef sandwiches at the café where he had eaten supper. Returning to the room, he stowed his purchases in the pack and tied it up. He carefully inspected both guns, put them under his pillow, turned the wick low in the lamp, and lay down.

Meanwhile, a strange scene had been enacted in The Green Parrot. Hardly had Lamont left the place when a striking figure, flashily dressed, slipped into the room from an areaway in the rear. He attracted immediate attention be-

cause of his dress, his jauntiness, and his smile. It was José, the Mexican.

Like Lamont, José was a good trailer and knew the country well. No matter how diligent and alert Lamont might have been, he never would have known that José was following him.

The crowd at the bar regarded the newcomer in astonishment and readily accorded him room when he paused across from the proprietor, who was as much surprised and interested as anybody else.

"Thundering tarantulas, but you're the gayest-got-up greaser I ever did see!" boomed Mike, with a grin.

José flashed his smile, noting that the other meant no harm by the use of the hated word. "Eet is nothing," he said in his soft accents. "I will take the drink an' then I tell you something you would know."

"Fair enough," said Mike. "Jerry, give this Mex a drink. Reckon he wants tequilla."

"*Si, señor,*" nodded José. "With the lemon an' water."

He fixed his drink of the fiery liquor, squeezed a bit of the lemon in his mouth, and drained the glass at a gulp. "Eet is ver' good," he sputtered. Then: "You have the ver' great man here to-night, señor."

"Eh? Oh, you mean the big sport who was in with the thousand-dollar bill?"

"A ver' great man," nodded José. "He carry the ver' great danger in both hands." He smiled again.

"Oh, he's a fighter, eh? Well, he's big enough an' quick enough with his hands an' feet."

"An' with his guns, señor, he is ver' queeck," said José.

"Yes, I suppose he is." Mike was feeling puzzled. "He did some quick work here to-night, but I thought it was luck."

José shook his head. "Eet is no the luck, señor. Do you know heem?"

"No. Do you?"

"*Si, señor.* I know of heem. He is the Señor Lamont."

There was a little period of silence. "The deuce you say!" the proprietor exclaimed stupidly. Then he brightened. "No wonder he was springin' thousand-dollar bills. Boys, if this Lamont starts to gamble with you, he'll take everything but your night shirts!" He was thoughtful for a few moments. "He's a tough customer, too," he added. "No wonder he made a fool out of Blackie Evans!"

"But he no make a fool out of heem-sel'," smiled José. "I jus' think mebbe you like to know but no say who told you." He turned to go.

"Here, have another drink," Mike invited.

José shook his head. "I mus' go," he purred. "I have the—what you call? The appointment?"

"Go ahead an' see your spick girl," said Mike, waving him on.

And José left, still smiling, and evidently not resenting this name either. With his going, the voices at the bar broke out excitedly.

At three o'clock Lamont rose. He did not turn up the light, but buckled on his gun belt, slipped his weapons in their sheaths, took up his slicker pack, and slipped out of the rooming house unheard and unseen.

He made sure that the street was deserted, then crossed to the livery. His horse was speedily saddled and the pack affixed. Lamont gave the night man a gold piece. "Don't say anything about my going," he said. "I made a big winning to-night an' I'm sloping before they get a chance to take it away from me." He winked at the man in the lantern light, and the man winked back. "I see where you're wise," said the latter.

Lamont rode out the rear door and down in the shadow of the trees to the

rear of The Green Parrot. Here he dismounted, took a small saddlebag, left his reins dangling, and walked rapidly to the front of the resort. He entered without a moment's hesitation. As he had expected, the crowd had dwindled at that hour to insignificant proportions. He did not see the proprietor as he walked to the bar.

"Where's Mike, old-timer?" he asked the bartender, who came forward quickly.

The man pointed toward the little office, the door of which was closed. At that moment, "Big Mike," as he was known, recognizing the voice, opened the door.

"Hello, Mike," Lamont greeted cheerfully. He looked quickly around and then raised the saddlebag and tapped it significantly. "I want to leave something with you for safe-keeping," he said in a low voice.

"Sure," nodded Big Mike. "Come in the other door."

Lamont entered the office from the big room, closed the door, noted that Big Mike had closed the other.

"Safe as in a bank when it's here," said Mike, looking eagerly at the saddlebag.

"All right, stick it in there," said Lamont. "Do I need a receipt?"

"That's up to you," said Mike, kneeling before the safe and twirling the combination dial. "I've never took anything yet that a man left with me."

"But you've took plenty they didn't intend to leave, eh, partner?" chuckled Lamont softly.

Big Mike chuckled also, as he swung open the doors of the safe. Then he rose and turned to find himself looking straight into the black bores of two guns. Great black eyes, they were; with death lurking in their depths. His jaw dropped and he raised his gaze slowly from those terrible guns to look into another pair of eyes fully as menacing. The man before him was not the man who had handed in the thousand-dollar bill, not the man who had bought for the house that night, not even the man who had entered his office.

Lamont's lids were narrowed to slits and between them shone a red-green fire, or was it blue? Never had Big Mike looked into such a pair of eyes. Despite himself, he shivered.

"Don't make a false move an' don't speak a word," came the ominous command through Lamont's teeth.

"You said you stole it from 'em so they could see," he continued; "but they couldn't see how it was done. I'm taking it so you can see an' can know just how it's done. Pick up that saddlebag and fill it with gold notes. I haven't much time, an' I can shoot before you can think. Go to it!"

Big Mike remembered now, in all its formidable aspects, this man's reputation. He picked up the bag, opened it with trembling fingers, pulled out a drawer.

"Don't forget that you an' I like big ones," Lamont warned. "I'm watching."

Big Mike jammed the yellowbacks of high denomination into the bag—thousands of dollars' worth. Then he closed it, and stood trembling, with those guns upon him.

"You said you'd like to see any hold-up rat sneak in here an' take it away from you alone," said Lamont in a low, stern voice. "Well, I'm holding you up an' doing it alone. An' I didn't sneak in, either. An' you can take your parrot's advice an' not ask for any change."

There was a lightning move of his left hand at which Big Mike almost cried out in terror. But Lamont had merely sheathed his gun. He reached out and took the bag from Big Mike's shaking fingers.

"Now, I'm going," he said. "You stay in here until you're sure I'm gone. If you step out, I'll drop you in your tracks as sure as daylight's coming. If

you make a holler, I'll come back an' kill every man in this place if I have to, to get you. An' you know in your black heart I can do it."

He dropped his weapon from his right hand into its holster. "They're both loaded," was his parting admonition as he opened the door and stepped briskly out, closing it after him. He walked to the front door and went out silently. Then he ran the length of the building to where his horse waited and, catching up the reins, flung himself into the saddle.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FLIGHT.

AFTER Lamont had left the office Big Mike's courage returned gradually; or perhaps it should not be called courage, but bluster. In a short space he knew that it was safe to give the alarm, and still he hesitated. How was he going to explain this one-man holdup after the loud talk he had made the night before? Lamont had made a fool of him; he would be the laughingstock of the town. Of course, he could just close the safe door and pretend that the robber had left something valuable in his keeping. Or he need make no explanations at all. And lose all that money? He had crammed twenty-five thousand into that bag if he had put in a cent! Then he had an idea. He quickly took from another drawer of the safe several packages of bills and put them on the desk. Beside them he placed some sacks of silver. Then he grabbed a gun from a drawer and dashed out into the big room.

"Where'd he go?" he shouted at Jerry. "That stranger who was in here —that Lamont?"

Jerry was so astonished at his employer's agitation that he could only stare with bulging eyes. Then Big Mike sounded the alarm.

"I've been robbed!" he cried. "I was counting money in my office an' Lamont came in to see me an' when I wasn't looking he took three packages of big bills! Come an' see!"

Men rushed to the office and, sure enough, there were stacks of bills and bags of silver, so arranged that there was a space where there might have been more stacks of bills.

Big Mike stuffed the money into the safe and slammed its doors as the men ran into the street spreading the alarm. Windows were speedily filled with heads staring into the street. Men came running clad and half clad. A big robbery in Kerrville, which had boasted it was immune! An angry mob gathered.

"Find that flashy Mexican," yelled Big Mike, as he came bursting out of the resort. "He told us who Lamont was an' he was probably with him or knows something more about him. Find that flashy Mexican!"

The deputy came on the run, listened hurriedly to the scant details, and called for volunteers with horses to form posses. "We'll get him in the desert," he shouted. "Take rifles, all of you who've got 'em."

So, while the posses were forming rapidly, scores of others began a search of rooming houses and the Mexican quarter in search of the suave José. But José was not to be found.

"Five thousand to the man who gets Lamont," cried Big Mike, as riders dashed for the down road and to the trail leading from the head of the gulch up to the high range. "An' there's probably a lot more on his head," shouted the resort proprietor, as the horsemen galloped on their grim errand in the dawn. 'Dead or alive!" was the final word Big Mike shot after them.

But he watched them go with a sinking feeling, for in his heart he did not believe they would get Lamont. He cursed himself for not having foreseen that the lone rider had come to Kerrville for something besides gambling.

The town was too rich; there were too many prizes.

Big Black Evans—now "Blackie" Evans for the rest of his life, in a perpetual cold rage and doomed to an insatiable hate for Lamont until he should avenge his dishonor—came riding up.

"Don't worry, Mike, I'll get him," he ground out.

"What you goin' to do, snare him?" sneered Big Mike.

"He had his hand down an' ready last night," snarled the big man. "It was luck, I tell you. Don't I know? An' that play to lay the guns down was a trick—or I'd gone with him in a minute. He's taken to the mountains. He ain't fool enough to hit for the desert in broad day. I'm goin' after him, an' I ain't comin' back till I get him!"

Big Mike felt a glimmer of hope. There might be something in what Evans said. And Evans was blue-lightning with his gun. Yes, there was a chance. "Go to it," he said hoarsely. "If you get him an' save my money, I'll give you five thousand cold—I'll lay it on the line in gold or bills, whichever you want."

Evans' eyes glistened. "I'll get him," he repeated; "an' I'll get him alone!" He drove in his spurs and galloped up the gulch, leaving Big Mike with the conviction that here was the only chance he had.

The sun was just beginning to tint the peaks with gold as Big Mike looked at the sympathetic faces of the crowd about him. Then snarling an inarticulate answer to the questions asked him, he hurried into The Green Parrot to answer the chief question for himself and find out how much he had lost.

Lamont was surprised at the long delay in the sounding of the alarm. It enabled him to race along the trees on the north side of the gulch and gain the mountain trail by which he had entered Kerrville before he heard the hue and cry. But he could count on many minutes of confusion and preparation before pursuit.

He was not so foolish as to think the posses, which he knew from past experiences would be dispatched at once, would assume he had taken the easiest trail, which was the road to the desert. He knew the riders who would hit the mountain trail would be among the first to leave. Therefore, he pushed his horse at the outset to increase his lead as much as possible while the trail was fairly good on the lower slopes. There were steep climbs ahead. One of Lamont's greatest assets had been to outguess his pursuers.

At the first ridge which afforded him a view, he felt the old thrill of the chase. There were horsemen on the trail below him. He pushed on, his eyes sparkling with the excitement of being a hunted thing. "Dead or alive!" That would be the motto of the man hunters. They would never take him alive, and he had no fear of death.

"Come on, pony! The bloodhounds are after us!" he sang aloud.

From this time on he did not look back. As he gained the heavy timber, he began to strike the first steep pitches in the trail. His attention now was concentrated on saving and helping his mount as much as possible. Higher and higher—surely none that followed him knew more about negotiating a hard trail. In this respect he had an advantage in addition to that of having gained a good start.

The sun climbed steadily in the eastern sky. Lamont patted the saddlebag, suspended from the horn. "Stole it in front of their eyes but they didn't know how it was done, eh?" He laughed, and there was genuine mirth in his laughter. "The old robber an' his parrot!" Stealing with the law behind him! Lamont's face froze into stern lines and his eyes narrowed. Then he shrugged and relaxed.

And now he began to watch the trail ahead more intently than ever. His gaze was always directed upward. He was watching for the dead pine—the pine that had been splintered by a lightning bolt. If he passed it—— But he must not pass it. The trail became a ribbon of rock leading upward through an aisle in the forest. He frowned and began to look back over his shoulder. There was no sense in that, he knew. Then why did he do it? Had he lost his old knack of leaving a posse to run their horses till they dropped for nothing? Had some of his old confidence left him? And then he almost shouted. For, dead ahead, up a steep pitch, were the whitened splinters of the dead pine lying over the cleft in the rock wall.

A last desperate scramble up that steep slope and he was riding into the cleft and through it, the sides of his horse almost touching the rock crevice. A short turn and a slight pitch and he was through the rock wall and out upon a high meadow, rimmed with trees. He dismounted, left his horse to graze on the rich grass, and took up his station at the head of the trail. If they discovered his ruse, which was unlikely because of the hard rock trail below on which a horse left practically no sign, they would have to come through the cleft one at a time. He could stop the whole posse with a single shot. A horse down in that narrow defile would do it. Or, if he wished—and he had no such wish—he could drop them one by one if they came afoot.

He listened intently. The crevice would carry the echoes of their horses' hoofbeats as clearly as if he were only three feet away. It seemed to him that he waited for hours and hours, so tense were his nerves. And then he heard them. Faintly at first; stronger and stronger, then sharp and distinct. They were passing. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven—seven in all, his practiced ear told him. The echoes slowly died away. Lamont slid his guns into their holsters and smiled. They had passed! It was the second time in his career that he had used this retreat; but on that other occasion it had not been due to any job he had pulled in Kerrville.

He unsaddled his horse. He was safe for the day, and the first day of a pursuit is usually the most dangerous. He undid his slicker pack and prepared and ate his breakfast. Then he lay down on the soft grass with his saddle for a pillow, the saddlebag containing the treasure underneath it. For the first time since he had left Seymore he was disturbed by thoughts of Dolores. What in thunder! Why should he be thinking so hard about her? But the thoughts persisted and it rather disconcerted him to realize that they were pleasant thoughts. Oh, well, if he wanted, he could go back any time. Still, he had never thought quite so much about a girl before; nor in quite such a way.

Thoroughly irritated, he sat up and built a smoke. He lit it thoughtfully; smoked it thoughtfully. Why wouldn't it be all right to go back up to Seymore while this affair burned itself out? But he had started out to have his fling, doggone it! Why should he let a girl cheat him out of it?

Suddenly he tensed, then leaped to his feet and ran to the head of the rock trail. Another! The echoes told him plainly that a lone rider was coming up the lower trail. He waited, gun in hand, until the ringing echoes of the horse's hoofs on the rock trail had entirely died away.

He went back and sat down wondering who this single horseman could be. Perhaps a straggler from the posse. But he did not like the idea just the same. Lamont had no fear of being taken, but he did not want to have to shoot men to get away. All his shootings had been forced upon him, and there were not

nearly as many as he was given credit for. Still, he was always dangerous.

As he continued to ponder over the coincidence of the lone rider, he made another cigarette. Hardly had he touched a match to it when he leaped to his feet again. This time he swore as he hurried to the top of the trail with ready gun.

It was another lone horseman! The hoofbeats became sharper and sharper until they reached the lower end of the defile. There they stopped. Lamont dropped his cigarette and drew his other gun. An age of silence, and then the hoofbeats sharp and clear in the defile!

Lamont's jaw clicked shut. Then, in sudden decision, he leaped away from the head of the trail and took up a position on one side, out of sight of whoever was approaching. With his hiding place discovered, he would have to take this rider prisoner—or kill him.

Louder and louder sounded the ring of hoofs on the rock trail until the very universe seemed to thunder with the ominous echoes. The rider was nearing the top. Lamont leveled his guns. A horse's head hove in view, then another head——

"Reach!"

Lamont's command broke like the crack of a whiplash. The horse stopped and two hands went high in the air. Lamont lowered his weapons involuntarily with his start of surprise. Then he cursed.

It was José, the dapper Mexican, who bared his white teeth as he smiled down upon him.

"The Señor Lamont will not shoot," he said in his soft, musical voice. "I jus' come on the errand to help him."

"How'd you know I was here?" Lamont demanded harshly.

"But I know thees place like the señor," was the answer, in a tantalizing pur. "I know thees countree jus' like the señor. I know eet is the only place where he can hide an' keep safe close to the town while the posse ride away for nothing."

"But how'd you know that I knew it?" Lamont demanded angrily.

"Because I see the señor stop las' night down below an' look. I watch from high up. So I know he know the place, an' I say, there he go when he want to keep from anybody."

"You watched me from above?" said Lamont incredulously.

"From the high ridge, I watch," nodded José.

"Then you followed me?" said Lamont grimly. "You followed me from Seymore?"

"But yes, I follow all the way; but I no let the señor see." José smiled amiably.

"Why?" asked Seymore curtly.

"To give heem the message from Dolores, who want heem to come back, an' because I think mebbe I can help heem when I talk to heem by myself."

"José, you're a liar!" Lamont exclaimed in mounting anger.

"Eet is not the nice word, Señor Lamont," said the Mexican, his smile fading.

"It fits when it's true," Lamont snapped out. "You were trying to catch up with me an' kill me unawares, that's about the size of it. Knife me, probably. It's just your style, I reckon."

"That I could have done as easy as that!" said José, his eyes flashing as he snapped his fingers in the air.

Lamont considered. Probably the Mexican spoke the truth. He had not been any too vigilant on his ride across the desert. In any event, he had to keep José there.

"Keep your hands in the air," he ordered. He stepped forward quickly and secured the gun José wore. Then he covered him. "Throw that knife out! But do it easy if you want to eat again."

"I have not the knife, for I promise Dolores I will not carry the knife."

Lamont reached up and felt the man's

shirt and ornate vest; felt him all over. Apparently, he had spoken truthfully.

"Take off your hat."

José snatched off his sombrero and swung it low.

"All right," said Lamont. "Get down an' unsaddle your horse; but, listen, José, if you try a trick—if it looks like you were going to try a trick—I'll shoot you an' kill you if it's the last time I pull a trigger!"

"The señor is ver' good shot," said José, his teeth flashing.

In a trice he was down and unbuckling the cinch strap, while Lamont watched with suspicion flaming darkly in his eyes and struggled with a new problem.

It seemed that after all he was going to have to kill this Mexican!

CHAPTER XVII.

JOSE TELLS A SECRET.

WHEN José had finished and had rolled and lighted a black-paper cigarette, he looked at Lamont with a scowl and, much to the latter's surprise, assumed an aggressive attitude.

"You do good job at Kerrville?" he asked.

Lamont could hardly believe his ears. Then his face reddened with anger. "Why, blast your spick hide!" he ejaculated. "You've got the nerve to ask me questions?" He made a step as if he would strike the man before him but stopped with his fists clenched.

José did not move and his black eyes flashed. "You no call me the bad names," he said stoutly. "I come with the message an' to do you the good. You think I like to do the good for you? Bah!" The last word was spoken in contempt, but his manner had its effect on Lamont. There was something to this young Mexican, and he was performing some kind of a mission which he did not relish.

"How did you know about a job in Kerrville?" Lamont asked, cooling down.

"Because I was there an' I maybe help," said José, almost hissing. "I tell them who the great Señor Lamont is so they be 'fraid of you an' no try to do you the hurt. I watch you, but you no see. I see you make the run-away. I follow. I see the men go after you, but I know they no find you. Then I see 'nother man go alone—the black one. He mebbe want to kees you, eh? Bah! He want to keel you anyway so he can. I am in the trees to hide. Then I come here. Now you know something."

Lamont's eyes had widened in astonishment. No wonder Big Mike had shaken like a leaf when he had faced Lamont's guns. José had disclosed his identity! And the lone rider had been Blackie Evans! José had given him important information. Why? And now it came home to Lamont that it was absolutely true that the Mexican could have killed him in the desert, or perhaps caused him to be captured. He could even have taken Lamont's horse away from behind The Green Parrot, if he had been watching, and thus have made it mighty hard for him to effect his escape. The contempt that shone in the eyes of José was not lost upon him, and he resented it; but there must be something behind all this.

"Sit down, José," he invited, dropping to the grass in the shade of some pines; "we can talk better."

"Ah!" said the Mexican youth softly. "Now the señor show the interest. Mebbe he no call the bad names till he hear what he want to hear, an' then he don't care, eh?"

"I don't forget a favor regardless of where it comes from," Lamont growled.

José sat down cross-legged. His face no longer bore its youthful mien. He seemed older and it was certain something was bothering him. Suddenly his eyes narrowed and flashed ominously. "The señor maybe forget that I could

keel heem any time I want, an' I no have to stand up to heem like my father. I could keel you when I throw the knife in the cabeen; but I know my father he want to do it heemsel'. The señor don't believe I could? Hah!" The youth laughed scornfully. "When my father die, then the señor almost get eet. But the señorita save him, an' she almost get eet. Does the señor remember she almost get eet? No! He no care. What is a girl—one girl—to the great Señor Lamont!" José sneered openly, and Lamont turned red to the ears.

He found himself on the defensive and justifiably so. "I do remember," he protested. "An' Jack knows I remember."

"Then why the señor go away so queeck?" José inquired mildly.

This was a poser, and it angered Lamont. "I am my own boss, José, an' I thought it would be best after—well, your father was a relative of theirs, wasn't he? Do you think I ought to be hanging around after——" He paused, biting his lip.

But the explanation appeared to satisfy José. "But they no care about that," he said. Then, softly: "My father ver' bad man, mebbe, but I stick by heem. So! But the señor could ask an' the señorita no want heem to go—but he go just the same."

"It was all for the best," Lamont persisted.

"Mebbe the señor want some more fun like thees morning—like he was used to have," said José shrewdly.

Lamont swore. "José, you're young, an' I'm not so old myself; but I've learned to mind my own business."

"Ah!" José was wise enough to realize that he had hit upon the truth, or the partial truth, at least. He smiled. "Then I say no more about that, señor," he purred.

Lamont gave him a dark look. "It takes money to keep me going," he flashed.

"Si, señor," purred José. "Now you stay long time up at the cabeen an' you pay well, even if they no care if you pay or not. Señora Guerra, she have the monee—plenty. An' the señorita"—Lamont saw him wince—"she no care for the monee. She like the señor ver' much."

"An' I like her very much," declared Lamont. "That makes that even."

"Ah! Then, if the señor like the Señorita Dolores ver' much, he will do her the favor," said José, with a hint of triumph in his voice.

Lamont's smile was sour. It was coming, then. Dolores wanted him to go back to Seymore and had sent the young Mexican to plead with him. The old feeling of resentment returned, although it rather thrilled him that she should go to this trouble.

"What's the favor?" he asked crossly.

"The señorita wants to see the señor ver' much," replied José, frowning.

"I see," nodded Lamont, drawing down the corners of his mouth. "Well, I told her I would come back, although I didn't say how soon, an' I'll keep my word."

"But she does not want the señor to come back to Seymore," said José; "she would meet heem somewhere else."

"Yes?" Lamont was surprised and interested. "Where does she want to meet me?"

"At Running Wells on the midnight twice from now," replied José. "Eet is in the south desert, which is not so far, an' José will show the way. There is only few house in Running Wells an' safe."

A queer look came into Lamont's eyes. "Let me get this straight. You want me to go with you to Running Wells at midnight day after to-morrow? Is that right?"

"Eet is right," José answered.

A flood of understanding drowned all Lamont's previous ideas. He laughed harshly. "José, I was beginning to

think you were a little bit smart," he said derisively. "But this thing you're trying to put over on me is about the thinnest scheme a man could concoct. I can see through it as if I were looking through glass. Go to this isolated place with you at midnight? Where your father's gang is probably waiting? Or where you can safely do some act of treachery? You must think I'm a fool!"

José half started to his feet, his face black with anger. "The señor is a fool!" he cried. "An' I tell the señorita he will not listen to me. An' then she tell me what to tell you so you will listen an' will do what she say. My father's gang? I no need my father's gang, as you call eet. When my father die, I could keel the señor so easy it would be play. You keel my father because you know you more fast with the gun. Eet is like shoot in the back!" The youth's eyes were blazing with hate and malice.

"I could keel you when you come back to the cabeen; I could keel you when you watch the cabeen from the place on the hill. Hah! You think I don't see. I could throw the knife between your shoulder blade an' kees the hilt while you lie dead with your face in the dirt! But the señorita say, 'No,' an' can no do. I go back to the cabeen an' when I go back to the hill you are gone. Then I have to follow in the desert. I no catch up an' tell because eet is not time to go to Running Wells an' I think the señor is gone to Kerrville to gamble an' not to rob. Now, you understand?"

"No, I don't understand," replied Lamont coldly. "You've got a fine story, that's all I understand. What did Dolores say to tell me so I would listen, whatever that means. I won't fall into your trap, whatever it is, José, an' I wouldn't trust you any further than the next minute. An', what's more, you don't leave this place until I do, an' you go in a different direction."

"All right—I tell you," said José. "Then mebbe you go. I don't care you go or not. I hope you no go. Then mebbe the señorita no like you any more an' I keel you. Just like that! I no 'fraid of the great Señor Lamont." He took out a package of Mexican cigarettes. "I love the Señorita Dolores, señor, ver' much. But she no marry me; for she is of the purest Spanish blood, señor."

Lamont started. Now he was hearing something.

José lit his cigarette. Not once while he was talking did he look at Lamont. He spoke in a cold, matter-of-fact voice. "The Señora Guerra is not the señorita's mother, señor," he continued. "She is no relation. She is a Martinez." A note of pride came into his voice, and Lamont saw his eyes sparkle. Lamont was now listening breathlessly.

"Her father was a great don," said José. "In Mexico he own the great rancho with hundreds of peons to work for heem. He was ver' great man. All over Mexico they know Don Juan Martinez of Sonora. And then——" José paused, his lips pressed tightly and a dangerous gleam in his eyes. "Then he is keel by the monster because he no give 'bout everything away. He is keel in the big revolution, an' the Guerras, who are his servants in house, take the señorita an' go way in the night. They come to United States an' eet is the revolution what make my father bad. He is not to blame. No." José paused, thinking this over.

He looked at Lamont with a frown. "You see how beautiful is Señorita Dolores? You see the skin, the eyes? Yes? Then you can see she is not Mexican. She is Castilian, an' that, señor, is the finest, pure blood of Spain." Again the note of pride was in his voice and the look of pride in his eyes.

"We Guerras," he went on, looking away, "are not Spanish. An' we are loyal to Señorita Dolores Martinez.

What she say, we do. I do not like for her to think ver' much of you, for you are not so good as she. You are mongrel an' robber an'——"

Lamont leaped to his feet, his face flushed. "You say what you were told to say, an' leave your deluded, ignorant opinions out of it!" he cried hoarsely.

José ignored him. "When the señor sit down I tell heem some more, mebbe," he said disdainfully.

"Well, watch your tongue, you——" Lamont could not help keep the word back as José turned on him again that wolfish look of hatred. He sat down.

"They are bring the señorita high in the mountains to hide," the youth resumed. "That is Seymore; but it was not ver' much town then, an' all there was good Mexicans. They are followed an' there is fight. My father's men they keel all. Nobody come again. Señora Guerra an' the señorita live there till now."

While José paused, Lamont considered this extraordinary tale. He realized that Dolores did not look like a Mexican, but he had thought her a little too full-blooded in the face for pure Spanish. And the youth's account seemed plausible. He had often endeavored to ascertain why the Guerras lived up there and how they had come there in the first place, but he had never been successful. What José had told him seemed to explain why. Also, there was a certain quiet sincerity in the young Mexican's voice and manner which was convincing.

"But why should Dolores want to meet me in Running Wells instead of asking me to go up to Seymore?" asked the puzzled Lamont.

"She no think you would go there, I guess," José answered. "So she come halfway to you." His tone was hard as if it were a bitter pill to swallow.

Lamont kept thinking. "This is why Dolores speaks such good English?" he said. "She went to school?"

"She learn English when she is little in the convent, for her mother die. An' Señora Guerra speak good English. Now! I am tell you. An' the señorita say when you know, I give you the piece of paper." His hand went inside his vest and Lamont's gun was out in a twinkling. "Hah!" sneered José. "The señor is 'fraid of—thees?" He held out a slip of paper.

Lamont, chagrined, put up his gun and took the paper. He unfolded it and read six words:

What José says is true. DOLORES.

There was no doubt about the handwriting. And he knew her signature well. He looked at José, and again caught the Mexican youth eying him with contempt. Lamont swore under his breath and José averted his gaze. Lamont rose and paced back and forth with the note in his hand. Of one thing he was absolutely sure: José never could have made up such a story out of his head. Then something else occurred to him.

"How did you come to get this note?" he asked. "Why didn't she tell me all this while I was there?"

"She no make up her mind to tell you until after you go," said José. "I go back to cabeen to get some things I leave there. You know, for you watch. Then she tell me to find you an' tell you if I must, an' she give me the note."

That clinched it. Lamont was convinced the youth was telling the truth. Everything dovetailed perfectly. He put the note in a pocket and his brow clouded.

"This is a bad time," he said, half to himself; "with them looking for me. I wouldn't have pulled that stunt, anyway, if that big blowhard of a Mike hadn't shot off his mouth so much."

"I will see you safe," said José quietly. "But it is my father's fren'—heem you call Buzzard—who will help us. They no catch you."

Lamont looked at him thoughtfully.

So he was to be protected in the same mysterious fashion as The Buzzard on trail! Only because Dolores wished it would he accept.

"Very well, José," he said. "We will go to Running Wells."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MAN AND A GIRL.

WHILE José lay down and smoked, Lamont continued to pace about or sit and smoke. He was beset by all manner of conflicting emotions. He had liked, and did like, Dolores very much. He now allowed himself to acknowledge that. What hurt him was what José had said about his not being good enough for her, or words to that effect. It hurt because Lamont was beginning to wonder if it were not true. But, in extenuation, he told himself that he had not known of her past or her blood—her heritage. Now he could think of countless instances when she had shown marked superiority over Señora Guerra, whom he had thought to be her mother; and, of course, there was no comparison between her and any of the other Mexican women. There were two things which consoled him: He had liked her before he knew who or what she was, and he had treated her like a lady, as a gentleman would, except for two or three displays of temper. Had he known she was not The Buzzard's niece, as he had thought, he would not have left Seymore so soon. Gradually he forgot these things as his thoughts centered on the girl herself. He would be glad to see her again, and he was glad he felt that way.

Shortly after noon he cooked a meal for himself and José. They ate in silence. Lamont was busy with his thoughts, and José was uncommunicative, stoic. That he did not relish his errand and the work ahead of him was plain to be seen. Lamont wondered if he should return his gun. He decided not to do this. But he realized José would resent it for it would show doubtful faith on his, Lamont's, part. Oh, well, that could come up later. And the posses! There was only one way down from where they were, that he knew of, and that was by way of the cleft below. Then they would be on the main trail over the shoulder of the range. If the posse should be returning that way and he and José should encounter them it would be bad business. Still, it was hardly likely the man hunters would return so soon. Anyway, that, too, would have to be taken care of when the time came.

José went to sleep after the meal and when Lamont had made sure of it, and saw that the youth lay with his back to him, he took the yellow bills from the saddlebag and stowed them inside his shirt where they could not drop below his belt. He had a wild idea about going down to Kerrville, returning the money to Big Mike and making a deal with him so that nothing would be done about it. He could say it was a joke. But that would be risky and—pshaw! Was he going to let a girl——

There it was again! The old fear of feminine influence. And he was really sorry for Dolores, now that he had heard her story. He kept thinking of her all afternoon while he lay dozing in the shade of the trees. Finally he slept. He was awakened by José, who was shaking him. He sat up quickly. He had not intended to sleep, but the fact that he had slept, and that José could have taken advantage of the fact, if he had so wished, without fear of harm to himself, caused Lamont to feel sheepish. Without further ado, he handed the youth his gun. José merely smiled and slipped it in its holster.

It was sunset and José had built a fire and put the coffee on. Lamont prepared the rest of the supper, the youth contributing some dainties out of his own small pack. When they had fin-

ished and had tied the packs, the twilight was swiftly dwindling into night.

"We start after while," said José. "We ride only at night."

"All right," Lamont agreed. "You're the doctor. But there's a chance we might meet some of my friends on the trail over the hump. If we do, the popguns will sing, I reckon."

"We no go that way," smiled José. "We go thees way." He pointed north.

Lamont was astonished. Well as he knew the country, and could remember that spot, he knew of no trail to the north and could not conceive how there could be one. However, he shrugged and let it go at that.

It was past ten o'clock and the night sky was flooded with stars when they saddled and made their start. José led the way straight toward the wall of rock which appeared as one of the ramparts of the higher range. Lamont remembered inspecting this wall of rock for some little distance and concluding it was solid. But now, when they reached it, José turned sharply to the right, passed behind some cedar bushes, and entered a fault in the rock. Lamont discovered that the rock as seen from a short distance was really a great slab standing upright and that the true rock wall was behind. But the two blended so perfectly that they could not be told apart unless examined closely. His respect for José increased.

After a short ride along a precipice they started down on a narrow and perilous trail and soon were in the timber again following a game trail. The moon began its climb above the ranges and flooded the desert below with a soft, silvery light. It was cool among the pines and a light breeze whispered. Lamont was conscious of a thrill at the prospect of seeing Dolores again. For the first time he realized thoroughly that he was more interested in this girl than he ever had been interested in a girl before. And also, for the first time, he regretted his past. Gone, for the time being at least, was the thirst for wild, lawless adventure; the desire for violent conflict. His thoughts of the girl and his past ran on and on—and then they were on the desert.

José struck up a smart gallop into the southwest. Lamont scanned the desert constantly for sign of riders, and found his suspicions returning. Why should Dolores want to meet him so far from Seymore when she could have sent the same message and he would have gone back to Seymore, just as he now was riding to this mysterious rendezvous? Perhaps she had said to come back to Seymore! Perhaps José was using the message and the note to serve his own ends! This was possible, as Lamont well knew. He would have to be on his guard every minute.

They rode until nearly dawn and came to a small ranch where there were some springs. There was only an old Mexican and his wife at the place. Here they had breakfast and Lamont was shown a room; a small, cell-like space in which was a cot. He secured the door by propping the one chair under the latch so it could not be pressed down, and lay down on the cot, fully dressed, facing the small window. He was resolved not to sleep, but he did sleep and was roused by a pounding on the door.

The second night they began to swing around toward the west, so that they were heading almost directly toward the foothills below the draw which had served as The Buzzard's rendezvous, although they were many miles away. Again they struck a lone habitation before dawn where a Mexican dwelt with his family. Lamont saw they were evidently following a chain of stops which had been made by The Buzzard on his expeditions. He did not doubt but that there was a secret hiding place in each of these houses, but it would be hard to conceal a horse. Perhaps the Mexicans had kept watch over the desert while the

outlaw rested. He would remember these places; for they were all new to him.

Shortly after they had had breakfast two Mexicans rode up to the place. Lamont instantly was on the alert. But the talk, which was in Spanish, was merely perfunctory. The men were on their way north and had stopped for something to eat. However, they kept eying Lamont stealthily and José made no move to introduce him or explain his presence.

The room in which Lamont was to spend the day had no window, nor did the door have a latch.

"I'll stay up for a while," Lamont told José.

The Mexican youth merely nodded and disappeared into another room. Lamont remained up all morning, noting that the new arrivals made no move to continue their journey. Then he lay down and feigned slumber. As he had expected, one of the Mexicans stole into the room. Lamont felt a hand feeling about his waist. He came to life suddenly. It would be just as well to show that he was on the alert now as ever.

In a moment he had the man by the throat and was pushing him out of the room. He saw the Mexican go for his knife, but before the weapon could be brought into play he pushed the man away from him and drove a smashing right to his jaw. The Mexican crashed to the floor of the one living room as his companion ran forward.

Lamont's guns were out, when a curt command in Spanish came from José behind him. The youth ordered the two men out and on their way. He seemed but little concerned over the incident.

"They are scrub brush," he said to Lamont. "They no be able to rob you an' I know that. See, they go right away."

It was true the men had secured their horses and the one Lamont had hit halted his mount at the door of the adobe and stared at Lamont with a look of hatred. Lamont noted a white scar across the man's chin. A peculiar feeling crept over him that he would meet this man again. The pair whirled their horses and were off.

Lamont turned to José. "Seems natural enough," he said. "There was no one in this room but one of those Mexicans. He was on watch, while the other did the work. Seems natural enough, José, but listen: I won't sleep again until we are in Running Wells to-night an' if anything starts, any trouble, I mean, you can bank on one thing, an' that is that you'll be the first to go!"

The threat brought snapping fire to José's eyes. "You yet think eet is the trick?" he cried scornfully. "Some time you will wish you had José along by you, mebbe."

With that he went back into his room.

Lamont was true to his word and remained up all day, sitting most of the time in the shade of the pepper trees scanning the desert. The place was a small oasis which afforded its owner a chance to grow enough to feed his family. Or so Lamont thought, although the Mexican had the build and the bearing of a man who was much in the saddle. Lamont concluded in the end that he had been one of The Buzzard's followers.

They started on immediately after supper, riding northwest now. This would bring them to the end of a spur of the Antelopes, south of The Buzzard's rendezvous. Thus Lamont saw that if this was their objective, Dolores would not have more than a day's ride from Seymore.

They rode steadily through the night, with José gradually increasing their pace until they were proceeding at a ringing gallop. José kept looking to southward and when, after looking in that directions several times, Lamont saw a number of swiftly moving shadows, he understood the reason for their haste. The

dark, moving dots were riders! Even in the emergency Lamont marveled at the eyesight which José possessed.

And now they pushed their horses to the utmost, crashing through sage, dodging mesquite and cactus, racing where an open stretch permitted. Both were splendidly mounted, and the moving dots to southward failed to gain.

Lamont could not surmise whether the horsemen were members of a posse searching for him, or a band of roving outlaws, perhaps members of the former Buzzard gang. And that José did not know either was apparent by the fact that he was running away. Ahead of them a dark blotch appeared on the desert and soon Lamont saw several pin-points of light.

"Running Wells?" he called to José, pointing.

"*Si, señor,*" replied the youth.

They were racing now, side by side, their horses fairly flying over the ground. The dark blotch began to assume shape; the pin-points of light became glowing yellow stars, and soon the little group of buildings were clearly outlined in the moonlight. Behind them the riders were following at a pace about equal to their own. Lamont thought they were too well mounted to be members of a posse. Again suspicion clouded his mind.

José checked their pace. The yellow stars now had become squares of lamplight shining from windows. Trees rose tall and graceful about the small cluster of adobes. They rode in among them and halted by a long, whitewashed adobe.

José dismounted and clapped his hands. As Lamont got down out of the saddle a Mexican came running from behind the house and José gave curt orders for him to take the horses. Then he turned to Lamont.

"You see, we are come," he said. "You are no hurt. I will see who rides after us an' take the attention. You no bother. Come."

He led the way into the adobe, which had a hall running its length. José walked the length of this hall and knocked sharply on a door at the left. Then he opened it and motioned to Lamont to go in. Lamont entered just as Dolores rose from a chair by the window, gloriously beautiful in the soft light of the lamp, her dark eyes glowing, her cheeks slightly flushed.

"Alex! You have come!"

In a moment Lamont had her in his arms—everything in the world forgotten but this girl whose arm crept about his neck as he kissed her.

José closed the door softly behind them.

To be continued in next week's issue of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE.

WHAT IS IT?

SOMETIMES circuses feature monstrosities which they label "The What-Is-It?"—some creature, most often a fake, that seems to defy the laws of nature. Such a living enigma was recently discovered swimming about in a pond near Eldorado, Kansas.

The creature, which is about a foot long, has the body and gills of a fish. It has four sturdy legs, with feet like a frog's, but with claws on each toe. It seems to get along as well on land as in the water, moving over the ground like a lizard. When staying in the water, it sometimes seeks diversion by coming to the top and snapping at flies, like a dog.

This interesting fish—or is it a beast—was captured and displayed in Eldorado's business district, possibly in the hope that somebody would give it a name.

Shorty, Master of Hounds

By Ray Humphreys

Author of "Shorty Goes Backward," etc.

"OPE," mourned Sheriff Joe Cook, frowning, "thar ain't one, or two or three men in the county, 'Shorty,' as could face Severo Aranda an' take him without bloodshed. The only way he ever kin be took is by a big posse, an' as fer that——"

"I'd be willin' to try to take him," said Shorty.

"So would I—ef I had a young army o' possemen to back me up," said the sheriff sadly; "but we ain't goin' to have no luck formin' any great posse to go git Aranda—— We've tried, ain't we, an' fell down? Yep, Aranda is too famous, too quick with the twin gats, too darin' fer most possemen to relish! Afore we git Aranda, son, we got to do two purty nigh impossible things—locate him, fust, an' form a army, second; an' I say neither kin be done."

Shorty McKay, the sheriff's young deputy, sighed.

"What yuh say about a posse is blamed correct, boss," he admitted sorrowfully. "We've tried to raise one three times to go searchin' fer Aranda, an' each time the boys are too busy, or too tired, or the weather ain't good, or something. I reckon it is because they are all kinda worried over Aranda's marksmanship, his cunnin', an' the evil reputation he has as a wholesale killer."

"Sure it is!" said the sheriff.

"Waal, then," said Shorty, puffing on his cigarette reflectively, "it sure seems to me, boss, that we gotta kinda git some community spirit around this section. We gotta arouse the boys to a sense o' their civic pride, an' the dues they owes to society in general—kinda arouse a public feelin' o' fellowship an' brotherly affection, so that when thar is a emergency it'll be each man fer all an' all fer each."

Sheriff Cook bit the end off a fat black cigar.

"The Chamber o' Commerce, the Noon Luncheon Club, the Ladies' Wednesday Endeavor Club, an' the Boys' Pig Club, has been tryin' to do that little thing around here fer years," said the sheriff, "an' whar have they got with it? Nowhar! I don't think it kin be done. They ain't no public spirit here. When we calls fer a posse yesterday, what happens? Nobody is home; everybody else has appointments; this guy is outta

ammunition; that guy kain't ride; this guy——"

Shorty blew a series of smoke rings ceilingward.

"Yuh gotta have sports an' athletics to git public interest to a high-fever pitch," he said slowly, "an' I propose to do jus' that. I read that in a book. I gotta idear that a rip-snortin', fust-class, honest-to-goodness, hair-standin'-on-end cougar hunt would be the thing to make this community stand up on its hind laigs."

"Cougar hunt?" gasped the startled sheriff.

"Cougar—meanin' puma, panther, catamount, mountain lion, or common ol' Colorado cat," said Shorty.

"But, my gosh," said the sheriff, "the Monte Vista Cattle Growers' Association has had mountain lions cleaned out o' this part o' Colorado fer ten years! Whar yuh gonna stage yuhr hunt—the other side o' the range, sixty miles from here?"

"I'm gonna stage it right here," said Shorty stoutly, "seein' I knows o' a bird over near Montrose who specializes in stagin' cougar hunts. He has a lot o' wild cougars an' a pack o' lion hounds that has everything in the State licked. He frees the cougar, gives it a good start, turns the hounds loose, an' away we go—everybody on hossback, leapin' logs, jumpin' fallen trees, takin' fences, fordin' streams, uphill an' down—glorious fun!"

"Yeah?" muttered Sheriff Cook doubtfully.

"Sure! These cougar hunts are jus' like the fox hunts they has down South—all kinds o' excitement, sport, an' thrills! We kin make it a big community event."

"What happens to the lion in the end?"

"Mostly they gits away, I hears; but sometimes they're caught. They're wild critters, trapped by this cougar expert; they ain't raised in captivity, which would make the hunt cruel. I say a real cougar hunt would weld this community into one, foster public sentiment, put our town on the map, be a lotta fun, an' we——"

"Mebbe so," admitted the doubtful sheriff.

"Mebbe so" was as far as Sheriff Cook ever went in committing himself on the cougar proposition, but it was far enough for Shorty. The energetic young deputy took the skeptical words as permission to go right ahead, right away, with his plans for the big hunt. He lost no time in arranging matters. Two days after his talk with the sheriff, Shorty had a long story about the proposed cougar chase on the front page of the Monte Vista *Clarion*. The headlines read:

Monte Vista To Stage Great Lion Hunt; Local Riders and Riderettes to Participate in Thrilling Shag After Cougar; Chase To Be Patterned After Famous Fox Hunts of South.

The idea set Monte Vista on its ear! It "took" instantly. Everybody who could straddle a cayuse was clamoring for more "dope" on the hunt, and Shorty found himself the most popular man in Monte Vista three hours after the newspaper announced the affair.

While Sheriff Cook was careful not to antagonize any of the cougar-hunt enthusiasts, he was peeved, just the same. As usual, when Shorty took an interest in any particular thing, all other matters went by default. So, now, did the search for Severo Aranda, famed outlaw, collapse. Shorty was too busy talking cougar to bother about Aranda, and all the sheriff could do was worry. Aranda, said to be the biggest crook uncaught in Colorado, had recently held up the Las Gatos bank, shooting two men and getting away with a sack of coin. Aranda had a reputation as a gunman—a two-gun man, in fact—and he also had a fine refuge somewhere in the mountains. The efforts of Sheriff Cook to

locate Aranda's hideout had always been in vain, and his appeals for a posse had not met with success, either. Every one knew a clash with Aranda meant bloodshed, and since the wily Aranda had spared Monte Vista and staged all his crimes in adjoining counties, the citizenry of Monte Vista were not anxious to go forth to battle.

"Waal, one thing about this danged catamount hunt," admitted the sheriff to Shorty, after the arrangements for the grand chase were well under way, "ef yuh kin git every ol' crippled-up grandfather in town, every pool-hall loafer, very nitwit, so excited about chasin' a cougar that they're practicin' hossback ridin' day an' night, mebbe, after the cougar business, we kin prevail upon some o' the more reckless gents to go chase a crook with us."

"My idear exactly," declared Shorty. "I figger the lure o' the lion hunt will start a epidemic o' excitement-seekin' that kin very waal terminate in a grand chase after Aranda; fellers will git the call o' the wild in their blood after the cougar hunt an' be bellerin' fer more thrills, at which time we will cunningly call fer another posse—an' every able-bodied man in town will respond instanter! By the way, sheriff, I'm askin' fer four or five days leave o' absence. I gotta kinda look over the timber country to see whar we best stage our cougar chase, an' go to Montrose an' arrange fer the cougar an' hounds, an' a few other preliminary matters—it may take me all o' five days!"

"Waal," said the sheriff slowly, "go ahead, Shorty."

While Shorty was gone the sheriff made another determined effort to get a trace of Aranda, but the effort was as fruitless as the previous attempts had been. So the sheriff settled down to await the after effects of the cougar hunt in the hope that the lion chase would result, later, in the formation of a formidable posse. All Monte Vista, it appeared to the sheriff, was crazy on the cougar hunt. Even Dan McAulliffe, the iceman, who tipped the scales at two hundred and thirty, had taken his off horse from his ice team and had been practicing riding pell-mell up and down Main Street like a man possessed. He bragged that he would get the cougar, but there were plenty of folks to dispute that claim with him.

Eddie Owens, the druggist, had bought himself an Indian pony for the cougar hunt, and had thereafter staged a miniature wild West along Larimer Street, and had later used three dollars and eighty-five cents' worth of his own liniments in repairing damages to his skin. Doc Healey, the coroner, had purchased a real jumper in Denver and was the envy of the whole town when he sailed over the five-foot fence surrounding the Widow Silva's garden patch. It cost him five dollars for damages to lettuce, early radishes, and green peas, but he said it was worth it. He announced that he would be first in at the cougar kill. John Feeney, proprietor of the Feeney Waffle Emporium, was painfully injured when a sorrel horse he had purchased for the hunt fell on him, but he announced from his bed that a few bruises would not keep him out of the hunt. Everybody in Monte was practicing riding, it seemed.

And then Shorty returned, with happiness written all over his face. He brought with him a sullen-faced Mexican youth, whom he introduced as Tony Garcia, a helper for the Montrose cougar man. The latter, named Bill Shanks, would be in Monte Vista at dawn on the following Thursday, Shorty announced, bringing with him his pack of famous lion hounds and one of the biggest, fastest, and most ferocious mountain lions ever trapped on the western slope in Colorado. The lion, Shorty announced, would be turned loose in the timber along Tarryall Creek just at dawn on the day of the hunt; at

seven o'clock, sharp, the hounds would be put on the scent, and the greatest sporting event in the history of the San Luis Valley would be on! The enthusiasm that Shorty exhibited was contagious. The whole town went cougar mad; Main Street became clogged with practicing horsemen.

"Shorty," said the sheriff, after he had heard the plan of the hunt from the deputy, "I ain't as spry as I usta be, but, by golly, I jus' kain't resist the temptation to git in that hunt myself! When I see icemen an' druggists an' butchers an' preachers an' pool-hall sharks preparin' to ride after lion, I'll be danged ef I'm gonna stay at home to keep the grandmothers an' little children company! Besides, ef I go, I kin keep a sharp eye out fer the real peppy hunters who might serve waal in a posse after Aranda later."

"Aranda," said Shorty, "won't have a chance after we git our lion hunters eager fer excitement an' ready to tackle him! O' course, yuh should go on the cougar hunt, boss, an' besides yuh should be some kind o' a official in the hunt. I have it! Yuh better be master o' the hounds, boss, an' blow the big horn that officially starts the hunt. Later, after the cougar is caught, yuh blow the horn ag'in as a signal to the hunters that the hunt is ended! I kin git a horn at the Wallace hardware store."

"Blow a horn?" said the sheriff dubiously. "What's the idea o' havin' a band along after a cougar?"

"It's always done," said Shorty, "as yuh waal knows ef yuh know anything about fox hunts. By rights everybody should wear silk hats or derby hats or caps an' red coats. An' at the end o' the race the master o' hounds jumps off his hoss an' grabs inter the pile o' fightin' hounds an' holds up the fox tail as a trophy."

"Me hold up a cougar's tail?" cried the sheriff.

"In cougar huntin'," said Shorty, "that's eliminated, fer it is most probable that Mr. Lion will finally take to a tree, from whar he will have to be shot or roped. So thar won't be no pickin' up o' no tail. But I'll get yuh a horn, boss, and——"

"No," said the sheriff decidedly, "I won't blow no horn. I'll jus' go along as one o' the boys—quiet an' respecttable."

So it happened that "Red" Feeney, proprietor of the Feeney Waffle Emporium, was named master of the hounds, after a spirited contest for the honor. Red got himself a horn and eventually "gentled" his horse so that the animal would permit the horn to be sounded from its back.

By Wednesday everything was in perfect order for the great hunt. Wednesday night few folks slept in Monte Vista. The morning of the hunt dawned clear and cool. Shorty was up before daylight, busy with Tony Garcia, the sullen-faced Mexican youth who had been his constant attendant for several days, ever since Shorty had returned from his five-day leave of absence. Bill Shanks, too, appeared on the scene for the first time, with his pack of big black and white and tan hounds. The dogs were surprisingly well-behaved, despite their impatience to be off. A yelp now and then as they circled around Shanks, who was mounted on a big, rawboned horse, was the only indication of excitement from the pack. Tony Garcia had already departed, on a horse provided by Shorty, before the arrival of the first hunters. By six o'clock, though, an hour before the sceduled start of the chase, scores of riders had appeared. A few women and girls were on hand, too. By seven o'clock the clearing near Tarryall Creek, where the hunt was to begin, was jammed with an excited army of riders.

"Whew, Shorty!" exploded Sheriff Cook, riding up on his big black horse.

"Did yuh ever see such a bunch o' crazy idjuts? Why, I see even ol' 'Grandpa' McMeel back thar, mounted on a pack mule, an' cartin' a ol' carbine big as a battleship gun! Ef thar ain't somebody hurt here to-day I'll eat my hat, linin' an' all! Did the cougar git away in good time?"

"He sure did. He left here at a mile a minnit, growlin' hatred fer the whole world," said Shorty. "He musta weighed five hundred pounds!"

The sheriff almost swallowed his cigar in his amazement.

"My gosh, Shorty, five hundred pounds! Why, that varmint will kill all the dawgs an' a few men afore he's put under control!"

"That's the risk o' cougar huntin'," said Shorty, shrugging his shoulders, and then he cupped his hands and yelled suddenly, wildly: "Master o' the hounds! Master o' the hounds!"

"Here!" cried Feeney, waving his bugle.

"Sound off!" ordered Shorty. "It's after time fer the hunt to start! Remember, folks, keep behind the hounds! Blow that horn, Feeney, we kain't wait fer late comers—we got more'n enough folks here now to have a big hunt. Blow that horn!"

Feeney blew. Instantly his horse reared, and the signal for the start of Monte Vista's greatest sporting event, the first annual cougar hunt, was abruptly cut in two. But Bill Shanks whistled at his anxious hounds and rode off with them toward an aspen grove. A second later the dogs had gone wild! Noses to the ground, they were darting hither and thither, their voices raised in mixed chorus. The confused crescendo echoed and reëchoed through the timber. Suddenly there was a shrill yelp higher than the rest. The leader of the pack, a great black and tan hound, had picked up the scent. He was off. The others were after him, like so many splotched streaks. Away went Bill Shanks, riding low. After him went Shorty and the sheriff and Doc Healey on his trained hunting horse. Immediately behind the doctor came the great army of hunters—crowding, jostling, bumping into one another. Somewhere far in the rear a gun went off, and the sheriff instinctively ducked his head.

The timber on Tarryall Creek never saw—or heard—the like of that cougar hunt before! First the pack of baying hounds, filling the wilderness with an uncanny clamor. Then the riders. And what a mob! The hounds leaped a small ravine and Bill Shanks, experienced horseman as he was, followed. Shorty did likewise, and the sheriff, too, but Allen Smith, a smartly garbed young hunter, who had pressed to the van, went headfirst into the weed-choked ravine when his bay mount refused to take the leap. The sheriff, seeing that Smith was unhurt, was enjoying a quiet laugh when his black horse tripped on a tangle of ground vines and went to his knees. The sheriff slid forward, digging two shallow trenches in the damp ground with his outstretched hands. The other hunters swept around the dazed sheriff. The black horse, however, waited quietly for his master to remount.

The hounds set a merry pace. They held to their course despite all obstacles, but the cougar, in departing, had picked easy going, it seemed. He jumped for logs. He went around them. He kept to the open spaces as much as he could, too, it appeared. He had chosen the man-made trails through the forest. As a result, the great bulk of the Monte Vista hunting party continued on with few mishaps. Grandpa McMeel was one of the first to desert. His mule suddenly swerved and headed back toward home, and Grandpa accompanied it, of course, seesawing on the reins and shouting disappointed ravings. Horace Stewart, who was riding with his eyes shut to avoid dizziness, was swept from the saddle by a low tree limb, but he got

to his feet unhurt, faced with nothing more serious than a long walk back to town.

The main body of hunters pressed forward eagerly. Max Hill, the grocer, left the party suddenly when his horse decided it had had enough and turned aside. Sheriff Cook, red-faced and hatless, regained his position in the van of the party after much effort. Shorty and Bill Shanks, riding ahead, had little to say. They rode at a hard gallop and set the pace. The hounds, baying mournfully, went on at a great rate. Distance was unwound under the galloping hoofs of the cougar hunting party. The hounds, leaving the Tarryall territory, cut out across rough country, and here the weaker of the riders gradually dropped away. When the hounds panted over Elk Mountain and made for the Elephant Cliffs country, however, there was still quite a formidable array behind them. The dogs were tiring, however, and Bill Shanks shouted to Shorty.

"Yuh reckon we goin' much farther?"

"No," yelled Shorty, in reply, "that cougar oughter be close now!"

"What in fury!" cried Sheriff Cook, who was now plenty sick and tired of the whole business. "How do yuh know whar that cougar is, Shorty? Fer all yuh know he may be in Wyoming by now! Say, my hoss is gettin' winded on this wild-goose chase! I'm gonna quit."

"Stick with us a little bit longer, boss!" exclaimed Shorty. "The worst is over—a few more minnits——"

The hounds scurried along the old trail that led up from the flats to the base of the cliffs. Shorty and Bill Shanks began to give their horses the spurs. The sheriff, frowning, managed to keep abreast. The rest of the hunters followed in close order. Shorty, with a quick glance over his shoulder, told Bill Shanks that there must be at least a hundred and twenty-five hunters still in the chase. Bill grinned. The sheriff, bouncing along, decided that the wily cougar must have taken refuge in the rocky cliffs. He was on the verge of making a remark to that effect to Shorty when the hounds suddenly halted.

"Thar!" cried Shorty.

"Now!" whooped Bill Shanks.

The hounds had halted in front of a cavelike opening in the cliffs. They set up a wild clamor and began to dart around in frenzied search, noses to the ground.

"Lost the trail!" groaned the sheriff.

"We ain't got Red Feeney here with his horn to officially signal the close o' the hunt!" exclaimed Shorty. "I guess Red must 'a' fallen by the wayside. I'll do the signalin'."

And with that he fired a revolver in the air.

"Hey thar, amigo!" he roared, at the cliff. "Yuh better come on out easylike, fer we've sure tracked yuh to yuhr lair!"

The sheriff gulped in astonishment.

"Yuh mean to say that cougar understands that?" he demanded, in awe. "Is it a tame cougar we been chasin' after all? I think——"

But the bulk of the hunting party, pressing up close behind the sheriff, never heard what the sheriff thought, for at that moment a man suddenly appeared in the cave in the cliff face. He held a rifle in his hands, but he dropped it as if it was hot at sight of the army lined up in front of the entrance. He raised his hands quickly and stepped jauntily forward, a grim smile on his swarthy face.

"Why didn't yuh bring all o' New Mexico an' Utah to git me, too?" he taunted sneeringly. "Yuh got all Colorado here!"

Shorty, who had dismounted, stepped forward.

"Slip yuhr purty wrists through these bracelets, Aranda," he said softly, "an' then we'll see ef my hoss will carry

double back to Monte Vista. Yuh should oughter consider it a great honor to be captured by the sheriff hisself, accompanied by his deputy, the renowned Bill Shanks, the big-game hunter, a pack o' hounds, an' a hundred and twenty-five o' Monte Vista's leadin' citizens!"

"Honor—heck!" commented Aranda witheringly.

"Anybody else in that cave, Aranda?" asked Shorty.

"Why—no," said Aranda.

"Waal then," said Shorty, looking at the mystified army of hunters, "I reckon I'll turn yuh over to Ramon Black fer the time bein'. Ramon, yuh escort Aranda down the back trail while I says a few private words to my gang here. We'll overtake yuh shortly."

"Sure enough!" said Black, beckoning to Aranda.

"Now, folks," said Shorty, as soon as Aranda was out of earshot down the slope, "I gotta offer an apology to yuh all. This wasn't no lion hunt a-tall. Yuh know who that bird is we jus' captured? Waal, it is Aranda, the most notorious gunman o' the State—a feller that boasts he is more'n a match fer a whole armload o' enemies. When he came out an' saw all o' us, however, armed to the teeth, he decided it was best to give in. I figgered that would be his reaction.

"Now in ketchin' Aranda we has done more than ef we ketched a hundred cougars. O' course, thar was no cougar at all. This was jus' a surprise party fer all concerned. Mr. Shanks here brought over his pack o' fox hounds—not lion hounds, folks—an' the hounds has simply been trailin' along on what South Carolinans would call a drag hunt. A drag, gents, is simply a raglike thing, doused with a combination o' chemicals an' odors to deceive the pore hounds inter thinkin' that they're follerin' a real fox instead o' a synthetic fox. We just had the drag lead to Aranda's hangout, an' when we came up with all the bayin', an' hoofthuds, an' rattle o' arms, we took him by complete surprise!"

The hunters seemed stunned for a moment, then they burst out into wild applause.

"Waal, Shorty, yuh sure fooled us—an' Aranda!"

"Good fer yuh, Shorty!"

"What's a cougar compared to Aranda, anyhow?"

"Thanks, folks," said Shorty, bowing. "I'm glad yuh enjoyed the excitement. It was a lot o' fun. An' now I reckon we had all better turn around an' head fer home, complacent with the thought that we has all done a good day's work, includin' those who, fer some reason or other, failed to be at the finish—at the kill!"

More cheers. More applause. More laughter.

"Say, Shorty," said Sheriff Cook, scratching his head, "I wanta ask yuh a private question, ef yuh don't mind. I see how yuh worked it to get Aranda—almost. But how in heck did yuh know whar to have the drag go? Who took the drag in front o' the hounds, an' how did he know, whoever he was, whar Aranda was located in these cliffs?"

Shorty looked around cautiously to make sure that the hunters were all on their way. Then he grinned at his puzzled boss.

"Why, when I took that five-day leave o' absence to arrange fer the hunt recently," he explained, "I simply ran down a clew I had that one Tony Garcia, a Mex youth from over Chico Creek way, was in league with Aranda. I did some sleuthin' an' nabbed Tony. I wrung the truth from him—that he knowed whar Aranda was hidin' an' was takin' grub an' news to him at intervals. I made a bargain with Tony. I promised to let him off, free, an' not prosecute him as an accessory ef he would ride to Aranda's hideout at a given time, draggin' the drag behind him. He was

to throw it up high in the rocks jus' before he entered Aranda's hideout. I explained that Aranda would never know we tracked Tony to Aranda's lair in that manner, an' that Tony, by stayin' in the cave after Aranda was nabbed, wouldn't be bothered——"

"Then Tony is in the cave now?" asked Sheriff Cook.

"Sure," said Shorty. "Didn't yuh see Aranda hesitate when I asked him ef that was any one else in the cave? But he didn't give Tony away. That shows he doesn't suspect Tony. After we are gone, Tony, a sadder but wiser boy, will sneak out fer home, an' I reckon he's had such a lesson that he'll go straight from now on. Say, boss, cougar huntin' is great stuff, ain't it?"

"Yes," said the sheriff, "it ain't!"

In Next Week's Issue of

WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

DRY GOING

By Kenneth Perkins

Here is a dog—not much of a dog anyhow—that had been licked a whole lot. He was used to it, but he didn't like it.

SHORTY PLAYS DUMMY

By Ray Humphreys

This doesn't mean at all that Shorty doesn't take a hand. Would that be like Mister McKay?

DON'T FORGET THE SERIALS!

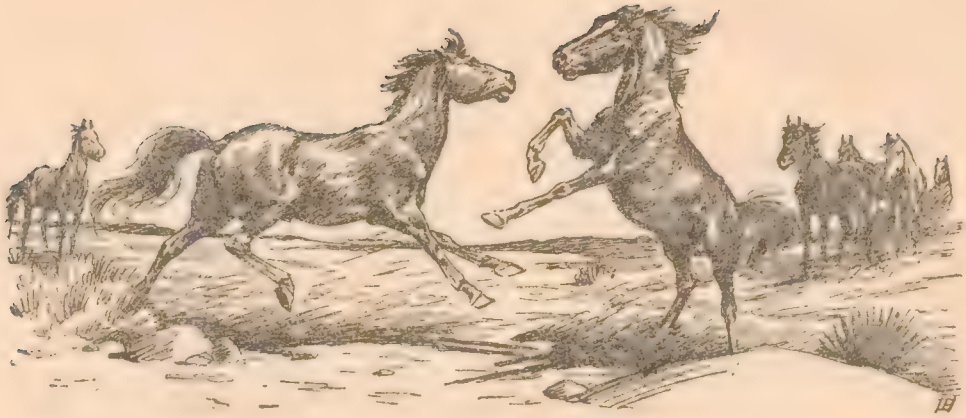
Here are two of your old favorites—Cherry Wilson and Robert J. Horton—taking their pens in hand to keep you amused and interested these fine fall days. Turn to "Stormy Dorn" and "Trail of the Buzzard."

Also Features by

Clinton Dangerfield Austin Hall

And Others

15c a Copy At All News Stands



A Wild Horse Round-up

By Russell A. Bankson

A LARGE band of wild horses in flight set up a plaintive, crooning song that fills all the air like the sobbing moan of lost sheep and a myriad wild duck settling to rest on the marsh at dusk.

It is the piteous, low cry of the mares and their colts, and it is broken every now and then by the piercing, shrill whistle of the stallions, sending forth their challenges and their commands.

Hundreds of wild horses were being jounced from the holding pastures on the range a distance of eighteen or twenty miles to the loading corrals at Great Falls, Montana, in the greatest round-up of wild horses ever undertaken.

And in all that distance of travel there was never a moment when the song of the horses was not filling the air from the earth to the clouds.

Following these prisoners who had forfeited their wild freedom, I began to think of their song as the wailing of the captives as related in a certain story of the ancients.

I spurred up beside the captain of the wild-horse round-up, young Carl Skelton, of Geyser, Montana.

He is a tall, lean youth, with sun-bronzed skin, a slow drawl of the Western plains in his voice, and keen blue eyes that are quick to cloud with trouble or twinkle with merriment. He is a son of the first pioneer stockman to settle in the famous Judith Basin of Montana, back in the '70s—a youth who was born to the saddle, and riding in the round-ups before he could throw a saddle to a horse's back.

He has played the rodeos, carrying away the bucking horse and bulldogging honors on many an occasion, while the multitudes applauded. But his place is on the open range, with a good pony beneath him. It is the only place where he is really happy.

I drew rein beside him and looked into his face. It was somber, even troubled.

He turned toward me and forced a smile into his eyes.

"Howd'y, 'Scribe'!" he greeted cheerfully. "You're really Western, now, ain't you?"

Then as quickly, his face sobered, and he waved a free hand out toward the mile or more of wild horses strung out ahead of us.

"Makes a fellow want to cuss, hearin' them cry that way," he said.

It did. It seemed symbolic—the song of the wild horses, like a dirge for the passing of something that we have known and loved.

An item appearing in the newspapers had sent me hurrying to the central Montana rangelands. It had stated briefly that what would probably be the last great round-up of wild horses in the West was to be staged in Cascade County, Montana; several thousand square miles of rangeland country which has Great Falls as its seat of government—an area which had been the home of some of the most famous brands of the earlier days.

In Great Falls I learned the details of the round-up. It was to be different —not a ruthless slaughter of the mustangs; but a gathering from the range of thousands of wild horses which were to be broken for riding ponies and light work-horses, and shipped to all parts of the United States.

And here, too, I was met by young Carl Skelton and conveyed by auto across the open rangeland to the field camp, which was set like an army camp in the field, beside a large watering hole.

I found assembled in this camp many of the really old-time cow-punchers, men who had ridden the range for years, following all the important round-ups from the Mexican border to northern Canada. They, like myself, had come flocking in from the far corners of the West —Texas, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho, Oregon and Montana—on the chance of excitement.

I had not ridden for a long time, but Skelton had a string of horses in the corrals for me, and the next morning at daybreak I was in the saddle, following a string of riders on a big circle through the Black Horse Lake district.

Horses were sighted when we were two miles out of camp. But it was a small band and a long way off, so we did not turn toward them. Reports had come in the day before of a large band grazing in the coulees leading down to the Black Horse Lake watering hole, and the circle boss had decided to bring these in.

Two hours of steady travel brought us, while it was still early, to the crest of a rimrock overlooking Black Horse Lake, and while the crew remained under cover, the boss crept forward and studied the coulees through his field glasses.

"Wild horses!" he called back over his shoulder after a few moments. "My gosh! The biggest band I ever seen!"

They were in a deep coulee leading back onto the table-lands, and were grazing slowly, after an early-morning drink.

Each of us took a turn at the glasses. We made out the figure of a fine old dappled roan stallion in command of the band, and estimated that there were well over fifty horses following this leader.

The riders had heard of this dappled roan stallion before, and the boss had been anxious to locate him.

He was reported to be a demon in battle, and to have pretty much the run of the range, other leaders stepping out of his way. Already he had been dubbed "The King of the Range," and he was looked upon as a real prize.

"At 'em, boys!" the boss ordered. "Four of you circle to the west, and four to the east, an' meet up there on the rim at the head of the coulee. Turn 'em into the basin an' bring 'em this way. Fresh horses will be waiting for us down at the Two Colt Creek. We'll keep 'em movin' all day, an' by night we can jounce 'em into the corrals."

It sounded easy enough when said just like that, but it was dusk of the second day when a group of weary

riders on weary mounts—the fourth of their string—jounced the dappled roan stallion and his band of nearly sixty horses into the field corrals.

He was a splendid old shaggy-maned fellow whose blazing eyes glared out through the strands of his long forelock. A glance would tell that he was no mustang, for he would weigh not less than fourteen hundred pounds, maybe fifteen hundred, while a thousand pounds is heavy for the average mustang stallion.

And then the lines of his body were different, showing a broad, heavy chest, wide hips, and substantial legs.

His followers, too, seemed of a different species, the mares and the young stallions all being broader, taller, and generally heavier than the slim, light mustangs and fuzz-tails which usually form a band of wild horses running on the open range.

The arrival of the King of the Range in camp brought every one out to the corrals in high excitement, to look the prize over.

"Hey, there!" an old-time cowpoke sitting astraddle the top rail shouted so that all could hear. "That feller ain't no 'slick.' He's had a iron on his left shoulder."

And sure enough, there it was, showing dimly beneath a shaggy coat.

The cowpoke read it aloud: "F hangin' lazy K."

Old-timers recalled the brand. It had belonged to a big outfit which had gone under years before. Then there spoke up a cow-puncher who remembered the story of the dappled roan stallion. He was an imported thoroughbred brought West to build up the "FK" stock, but in the second year he had broken pasture and taken to the brakes, and in time had been forgotten.

King of the Range must have been twenty-five years old, but he was filled with the fire of a five-year-old, for before he had been in the corrals half an hour he had given battle to two stallions, routing them with savage kicks and bites.

He had assembled about him the finest on the range, and his own blood had built this stock up, so that practically every horse in his band was superior in build to the average.

Hunting the wild horse is no child's play or pleasure outing. It is hard work, and it is often filled with danger. It means riding in the saddle from daylight until dark, over rough country and under a torrid sun. It means sleeping in blankets spread out on the ground and eating from the back end of a chuck wagon, or squatting about a cook tent with a plate of grub balanced on a knee, while a cup of strong coffee seasoned with condensed cow and nestling in the grass makes a fine receptacle for ignorant young grasshoppers and venturesome gnats.

It means hard throws from untamed horses; and it means shaking out your bedding every night to make certain that no over-friendly rattlesnake wants to share your humble couch.

Yet there are the pleasures and the compensations, and that undefinable lure which keeps men at it through sweltering summers and the harsh blizzards of winter. There is that deep-rooted love of the steaming horse and the creaking leather which will hold men to slavery through six days of a week and then impel them to stage an amateur rodeo on Sunday, roping and mounting wild ones, and taking hard falls that would kill a city-bred man.

They are a queer lot, a lovable bunch, these old-time cowpokes who ride the Western rangelands and keep the flames of romance burning on a frontier that is struggling desperately against the relentless advance of a modern civilization.

They are still a hard-riding, loud-cursing, quick-shooting race of men who would deny vehemently that there is an ounce of sentiment in their rough make-up.

One evening after chuck, I slipped down to the corrals to be alone with the horses, to study them, to try to understand them.

But I quickly found I was not alone. Down inside one of the corrals I saw a bow-legged old cowpoke who had ridden far and hard that day. He had his hand extended, and he was advancing slowly toward a fiery young stallion that had been brought in off the range the day before.

Standing quietly outside, unobserved, I watched and listened.

The puncher was crooning soft words to the mustang, which was studying his advance with head up and eyes popping.

"Yuh're a nice little old feller, ain't yuh?" the poke said. "Come on, now. Yuh an' me's friends, an' they ain't no use o' yuh denyin' it."

On and on he talked, slipping forward an inch at a time. And, believe it or not, within fifteen minutes that mustang slick that had never before known the touch of a human hand was standing quietly, permitting the gnarled fingers of that cow-puncher to tickle him behind the ears and to stroke his glossy neck!

Sentiment? That puncher would have hooted at the idea.

On another occasion a string of riders came in from a circle, jouncing a band of fifty or more wild ones which they had hazed out of the brakes.

It had been one of the hardest rides made, for the band was truly wild. Throughout the long day the band had constantly leaned back toward the bad lands, and the united efforts of eight riders had been required to hold them in the open.

At last they were in the corrals, though, and weary riders, their mounts rubbed down, staked and munching contentedly at their berries—a mixture of wheat and oats fed to the horses that are being ridden—flung themselves on the ground to await the call to "Come and get it."

Suddenly, black clouds shoved up over the horizon, and within a few minutes it was pouring rain.

The men rushed for the shelter tents—that is, all except one, the hardest-riding, toughest old cowpoke of the crew, a man who, according to his own recollection, had been in the saddle for thirty-seven years and who had never missed riding in a worth-while round-up in all that time.

Without a word, this fellow gathered up his saddle and blanket and went down to the corral where the cavvy was being held for the next day. No one asked him a question, feeling rightly that he knew his business.

He roped a horse, saddled it, and rode swiftly away into the storm, back over the route along which the band of mustangs had been jounced into the corrals.

Chuck was dished and "Cookie" counted noses.

"Whar's that 'er bow-legged ol' cuss?" he demanded.

"Ridin'," some one mumbled through a mouthful of stew.

I saw Cookie dish out a generous portion of grub and shove it into the oven of the camp range to keep warm.

An hour and a half later, with the storm still pouring torrents of rain onto the gumbo plains, and with daylight fast fading, we witnessed the return of the cow-puncher.

He was wallowing through the gumbo on foot, the thick, sticky mud clinging to his feet in half-acre portions. His pony was following, the reins over the cowpoke's shoulder, and the former rider was bending laboriously to the task of half carrying, half supporting a bedraggled young colt.

The queer trio came into camp. The cow-puncher deposited the colt in the shelter of the corral, attended to his horse, and settled down to his grub with real relish.

"Seen the durned little fool drop out o' the hard this afternoon," the cowpoke

commented. "Didn't have time t' stop for him then. Figgered t' round him in t'-morrer. He wouldn't 'a' lasted through the night, though. He was already down in the gumbo."

That was all any one said about it. The colt was worth absolutely nothing. But it was alive—and it certainly was helpless.

Of the animals that are brought in on the wild horse round-up, quite a large percentage carry brands. Yet these branded horses, for the most part, are just as wild as the slicks or unbranded ones. They have been at large on the range, some of them for many years, running with the truly wild horses. They were probably branded as colts, during some round-up, and have never since been roped.

But when one considers the wild horse, he must consider that the horse is not truly a wild animal.

The horses were not wild on the range in their native state. Each and every one of them is descendant of the tame horses that were imported onto the ranges by the white people.

The origin of the wild horse, in some instances, and possibly more especially in the Southwest, may date back to the Spanish invaders. In the Northern cattle States, however, the likelihood is that the wild horses are of decidedly more recent origin.

Some of them may date back to the early pioneers who crossed the plains on horseback or with horse-drawn wagons, and to the United States soldiers who were stationed at the frontier posts and permitted the escape of their mounts; but it is more likely that most of them would find their source on the ranches that were established by the pioneer cattlemen in the '70s and the '80s.

There were bound to have been many horses turned to the range that strayed away into the brakes and were never again rounded up.

So the wild horse of the Western rangelands is a wild horse only in the sense that he has reverted from the tame state to the wild, and has since bred downward, until a species of small animal has been created that is known variously on the range as cayuse, pony, mustang, bronc, and fuzz-tail. The names are more or less local.

On the Montana rangeland they are known as mustangs, though the really small, scrubby stock are called fuzz-tails.

And the fact that branded animals are still found with almost every band of mustangs is evidence that the process of transition from the tame to the wild state is still under way.

In these brands, as they are read in the corrals, the old-timers on the round-up recall fascinating bits of the early cattle history of Montana.

Some of the brands represent big outfits that played an important part in the making of the history of the State of Montana, but have long since passed on.

One day a string of riders came in from a long circle far back into the Missouri River Brakes, driving before them a thoroughly wearied band of mustangs.

But among the smaller horses were two that stood out shoulders above any others in the herd.

One was a golden roan and the other a black brown. They were so thin, so gaunt, that they almost staggered. Their ribs showed through their rough coats and their hip-bones protruded sharply.

Yet they walked side by side with a proud, quiet dignity that no mustang ever had, their heads high, their ears erect, their necks arched, mincing their steps with long, slim legs and small ankles.

The crew gasped at sight of them, and some one laughed aloud. But an old-timer, a native to those parts, stepped forward and examined the pair.

"There," he said, turning to me, "is a real story for you."

The others crowded about, silent, and the old-timer went on:

"Thirty year or more ago that team was the finest span of high-stepping horses in the whole State o' Montana. Do I know 'em? Sure I do! I'd know 'em if I seen them in China, er Heaven, er New York City.

"There was a certain man in these parts that cleaned up a fortune in the early days. Don't make no difference how he got it, but he sure had the dough—an' he was a dandy.

"He had a nice drivin' team, but a rival got hold o' one that beat hisn, an' this here gentl'man swore he'd put his rival t' shame. So what did he do but sack up a bunch o' money, board the train, an' travel back t' Kentucky, where he bought hisself the finest span o' horses in the whole State. And they was them same two horses yuh're a-lookin' at right there before yuh.

"He hired a special car an' rode out here with 'em, an' for several years he used t' parade up an' down the streets o' the cow towns, showin' off.

"Them high-steppers done him fine service, but they come a time when he was through with 'em So he turned 'em out on the range t' finish up their years.

"They ain't been heard from fer a long time, an' I'd reckoned they'd been dragged down by the wolves long before this."

That was the story. And it left the boys rather sobered.

Carl Skelton, the young round-up foreman, whose age was some years less than that of the old team of horses, walked over to the corral bars and lowered them.

"Cut the old boys out!" he ordered quietly. "Guess they've earned the right to the freedom of the range for the rest of their days."

A battle between rival range stallions is a primitive, cruel test of strength which often lasts to the death of one or both combatants.

One afternoon near dusk, I followed several of the riders up onto a high butte overlooking a grassy basin some distance beyond.

They were searching out wild bands, and in the basin they spotted three of them, each being closely guarded by its shaggy-maned leader.

Lying close to the ground, we watched two of the bands graze toward us, until we were looking down almost upon them.

As the groups neared each other, the stallions became nervous, and circled their subjects, drawing them into close formation to prevent any intermingling.

But in spite of these precautions a black mare belonging to the band of the bay stallion lagged behind. Instantly, the dappled-gray stallion of the rival band swooped down upon her and strove with bites and kicks to force her into his own flock.

Her first squeals brought her lord and master in a swift charge, and the gray turned to meet the onslaught.

The bands, huddled in compact groups fifty yards apart, watched; and the black mare, alone, halfway between, waited.

The stallions, of an even size, charged at each other with blazing eyes and bared teeth, and with their ears laid back along their necks.

They sought first to rip chunks of flesh from each other's sides as they passed, then they raised their heels. But instantly each had wheeled and this time they reared on their hind legs and charged with forelegs thrashing the air and jaws gnashing.

The blows which they struck with their front feet echoed across the basin on the still evening air, and could have been heard for a great distance. They would have crushed skulls less hard, but they did not seem to be felt by the

fighters, as each reached in, seeking to sink his teeth over the jugular vein of the other.

Then the gray was in swift retreat, with the bay in hot pursuit, nipping at unprotected flanks, their hoofbeats thundering out across the basin like the rumbling peals of a summer storm.

But before the race had fairly started, the gray wheeled and swung in behind the bay, and the order of the battle was reversed.

The next moment, though, they were on their hind feet, coming at each other like boxers going into a clinch, each desperately intent on ripping open the throat of the other.

Back and forth they swayed, squealing, screaming, striking, biting, red with gore—primitive gladiators battling for the favor of a lady fair; ready to battle until one or the other crawled away to die.

It seemed after a time that the bay was wearing down the gray; and at this juncture the black mare slipped quietly back among the members of her own band.

The move was noted instantly by the two leaders. They ceased their slashing blows. The bay raised his voice in a shrill, piercing call.

Immediately it was answered by the black mare.

As though her answer settled the dispute, the two gladiators turned heel on each other, trotted back to their respective bands, and resumed their posts as sentinels.

The wild horse leader is a savage battler, and he is as merciless an autocrat as ever ruled over a group of subjects when it comes to the band of which he is the monarch.

He is king, though, only so long as he is the superior of all others in physical strength; for the law of the band is the law of the survival of the fittest. He exacts obedience to his orders with bites and kicks.

There comes a time, though, when some young stallion belonging to the band feels that he is ready to test his spurs.

At that moment he offers defiance to the leader. If he is successful, he becomes the king and all members of the band follow him without question, while the defeated champion becomes an outcast, or a humble follower.

On the other hand, if the monarch retains his position, the fledgling is whipped into subjection, or is driven away, to try his prowess on other leaders, until he finds one that he can defeat.

A popular conception of most of the wild leaders has been of a large, fiery animal with glistening coat that towers above his subjects and leads them majestically away to safety in times of danger.

On the contrary, the mustang monarch is a comparatively small animal, judged by the average farm or city horse. In studying scores of them captured in the round-up, it was found that they ranged in weight from seven hundred to one thousand pounds, with the average possibly around nine hundred.

They are, nevertheless, as picturesque and as romantically interesting as the fictionists have portrayed them.

There is something about them that is distinctive. Their bodies are solid, and steel muscles ripple beneath the skin, revealing the power of their stocky limbs and the endurance which has made them famous in long races for their liberty. Their shaggy manes, forelocks that droop like a veil over their faces, and heavy tails that sweep the ground, add, too, to their coloring.

When danger approaches, though, they do not lead the band. That important duty is left to a wise old member of the company, usually a mare who has had years of experience in dodging pitfalls and traps.

The monarch stands sentinel over his

subjects while they graze or rest, usually on a ridge that gives him a good outlook over the country. He will stand motionless for hours at a time, head up, ears and eyes alert, his nostrils testing the air.

At the first suggestion of danger, he sends forth a shrill call which brings the band huddling about him. His information is conveyed to the others, then the mare strikes out, with the band close upon her heels. The stallion brings up the rear, his ears along his neck biting viciously into the flanks or the rumps of the laggards.

The danger past, the stallion again becomes the lordly guardian standing faithfully at his sentinel post.

Strange as it may seem, stud mules are known to become leaders of bands of wild horses, and when they do they are more bold and cunning than any stallion.

One particular instance was found in the central Montana round-up.

Nesters, or settlers on the rangeland, brought into the round-up camp frequent stories of a large band of wild horses ranging far back in the bad lands that were ruled over by a heavy gray mule who was given the attributes of a villain in human life.

It was said that he would come out of the brakes at night, with his band, and that he would deliberately charge a barbed-wire fence, tearing out sections of it, to admit his followers to a field of growing grain. Not contented with a rich repast, he was said, then, to undertake to stamp out all the crop that remained.

The round-up riders found mule tracks mingled with the tracks of the horses after some of these reports, but they were never able to come upon the gray mule. Somewhere in the fastness of the bad lands he still has his hidden lair, while the stories about him grow until he has taken on some of the familiar characteristics of a certain superhuman individual with a forked tail.

The wild horses, not so many years ago, bid fair to cover the rangelands of the West as prolifically as did once their predecessors, the buffalo.

But organized campaigns against them in various sections have sadly depleted their numbers.

"Their passing will bring back the cattle, for two steers can graze where one horse feeds," the stockmen say.

So the edict has been issued: "Round up the wild horses!"

Riding beside young Carl Skelton, the captain of the round-up, I listened to the plaintive, sobbing whimper of the wild horses as they were being jounced across the rangelands which they loved and had known as their home all their lives, and I looked into the boss' troubled face.

"Makes a fellow want to cuss, hearin' them cry that way," he had said.

"What will you cowpokes do when they are all gone?" I ventured. "You won't have anything left in life that is worth while, if you can't mount a sunfishing, side-twisting, back-bowing wild horse right off the range, now and then."

At that the troubles vanished from Carl Skelton's face and he grinned.

"Say," he drawled, "I ain't a fool. I'm leavin' plenty of bait back there in the brakes. Good stock, too. In a few years there'll be as many wild horses in these parts as ever."

So, while we jogged along, thinking of our little secret, the song of the wild horses ahead rose and fell in a monotonous crescendo of sound that filled the air from earth to sky.

He'd Always Craved A Ticker

By C. Wiles Hallock

WENT t' Tucson recent' fer t' buy meself a ticker—
Allus craved a ticker—with a chain acrost muh chest;
But the pawnshop feller said:
"Buy a wrist watch, pal, instead
Of a clock yuh gotta anchor t' yore vest!"

Made me feel ol'-fashioned—— So I buys the gol-durned trinket;
Cinched it on muh shootin' arm an' headed out o' town;
But I cussed thet pawnshop slicker,
'Cause I allus craved a ticker
With a chain thereto—t' sorta dangle down!

Durn' thing irked muh near arm, so I cinched it on muh off arm;
Didn't like the feel of it no better than before;
So I puts it in muh pocket
An' goes back t' town—t' hock it;
'Cause the pesky thing has got me good an' sore!

Didn't have no trouble—— Told thet pawnshop feller plenty—
Got a ticker like I craved—which cost a dollar fifty—
Fer t' carry in muh vest,
With a chain acrost muh chest.
Which it set me back nine bucks—— But, gawsh—it's nifty!

What The Herder Heard

By Austin Hall

Author of "That Dog-gone Dog!" etc.

THE difficulties of the sheep business are a thousand times manifold; sometimes it's one thing, and again it's another. At least, that was the opinion of Jean la Jeannette, trusted herder for the growing flocks of Bob Arnold.

The trouble had started on a beautiful spring day when Jean had driven the roan ponies and the supply buckboard out to the fringe of the western foothills. He was carrying provisions, and he had not the least idea that his trip would be one of adventure. However, when he arrived at the white tent under the sheltering bluff and discovered Tony Alvarez with a twisted ankle, he knew that he was in for it. There was nothing to do but take over Tony's job and send him back with the wagon. So, within an hour's time, Jean had lifted the disabled sheep-herder to his place on the seat, handed him the reins, and traded places. Tony was to return to the big boss at the ranch house, and send out a man to relieve Jean la Jeannette; or, if the boss should decide that Jean must stay, he was to send out the old dog Rex.

"Ou la," said the stubby Jean, "yuh tell zee monsieur. So. Jean la Jeannette must have zat dog Rex, or else Jean she's come home mighty queeck. Zat dog of yourn she's all right; but she's jus' dog. Savvy?"

The buckboard had disappeared in the green distance, and Jean had returned to the flock. It was still middle afternoon and the sheep were hungry; already they were browsing along, shifting under the erratic guidance of the young sheep dog. Jean had plenty of time to head out into the plain where they could feed slowly, and then turn up a hidden draw where he would find water. After that, he would return to camp, cook supper, smoke his pipe, and lie down for a peaceful sleep. It was all in the day's labor. Nothing could have been more soothing than the azure sky, the soft balmy air, and the green landscape. A thousand woollie beauties moved along, contentedly feeding, with the young dog walking behind as proud as a peacock. Jean filled his pipe and smiled serenely.

However, it was only a calm before a storm.

When the flock was about a mile out,

two riders appeared on the horizon, mere dots, heading northward. Jean recognized them as cattlemen, which was nothing to be worried about as the stock growers and Bob Arnold, his boss, had always been on peaceful and law-abiding terms; that is, all except a certain clan of half outlaws, the Callahans. But the holdings of the Callahans were on the other side of the valley; and the two worst ones of the tribe were serving terms in the penitentiary. Altogether, they were not due nor expected in the great spring pasture of the sheep men. Jean watched the dots riding closer and finally disappearing into a depression of the mighty plain. At the same time the flock dipped down into a clover-carpeted hollow, and he forgot all about the riders, until about half an hour later when two silhouettes appeared along the eastern rim and looked down at him.

In that instant Jean knew he was in for it!

The men were not to be mistaken. They were Callahans both, their faces covered with red, coarse hair, heavy-set, brutal. The same old gang, tattered chaps, dingy shirts, evil leering eyes. One of them was about thirty-six years old; the other not more than twenty-eight. When Jean la Jeannette recognized them, they were leaning on the pommels of their saddles, for all the world as though they were gloating over the prospect. But it was the younger man that Jean was afraid of. The fellow was a known killer, the meanest thug on the range, and until very recently an inmate of the penitentiary. In fact, this was the first intimation Jean had received of his release. More than that, the renegade had been sent up by the sheepmen on the testimony of Jean la Jeannette. Altogether, it was not a pleasing prospect for the sheep-herder. He heard the fellow's taunting words:

"Durned if it ain't!" he was saying gleefully. "Dog-gone. It's our sweet little skunk of a sheep-herder. The mangy little dog. Jean la Jeannette! Nice pretty name, ain't it? Yuh bet! And this cur sent me up tuh the pen, he did! Squealed on a Callahan. What are we goin' tuh do with him, Mat?"

At the same instant he yanked out a wicked six-gun and fired point-blank into the helpless pack. A big ewe rolled over. The young dog dashed out with a fury of barking, and the gun swung around. *Bang!* The poor shepherd rolled over with a bullet between the eyes. Jean was unarmed, but even if he had held a cannon, he would not have risked a gun duel with a Callahan. Nevertheless, he was mad all over; the killing of the dog had driven him into a frenzy.

"Mon Dieu!" he exclaimed, at the same time seizing a rock. "Zee Callahan! Yuh pay fer zat! Yuh see, once again yuh go to zee jail. And deese tam yuh hang. Yuh——"

There was no time for more; the two horsemen were dashing straight at him, one riding to his right, and the other to his left. Jean la Jeannette heaved the rock, missing the younger man by a few inches; whereupon, the villains leaped to the ground and sprang at him. There was nothing to do but fight for his life. Like a live bundle of springs, the stubby little sheep-herder dived in; for an instant he was like a battling hornet, and then a blow from an iron fist caught him in the eye, filling the air with comets, and stars, and all manner of weird lights. In his agony he heard the younger man bawling wickedly:

"Let me have him, Matt. Let me have him! He's my meat anyway. I've been thinking about this for three whole years, and now he's right where I want him. When I get through with him and Bob Arnold this summer, they'll be out of the sheep business for good and all. And so will some of the others."

And between each sentence, a blow landed on Jean's face—a cutting lacer-

ating blow that was guaranteed to disfigure. The poor sheep-herder was out weighed by eighty pounds, and crippled; he did not have a chance. Both eyes were closed, and red streaming from his lips. When his victim could no longer stand, the villain seized him about the neck, and held him up while he mercilessly beat him with the other fist. The last thing Jean could remember was that he had fallen and that the other man was kicking his head. After that came oblivion.

The next thing he knew, the stars were shining, and he was trying to get to his feet. A blur followed, during which he staggered toward the camp, and at last lay down under the welcome shelter of the tent flap. That was all. When he regained consciousness again, it was morning and he was looking up into the face of Bob Arnold, the sheepman.

So much for the spring incident.

From that moment, Bob Arnold and the sheep-herder knew that the sheep and cattle war would be on anew, and that up around the Squirrel Lakes, where the Callahans held their disputed holdings, there was certain to be trouble. Later, word came to Bob Arnold that there was some mysterious danger of a new sort afoot. The Callahans were out for blood; but this time they proposed to be within the law. Altogether, the thing was a puzzler, so much so that several of the bigger sheepmen positively refused to send their flocks to the mountains.

But Bob Arnold and Jean la Jeannette were not to be bluffed. They had fought it out many times before. Furthermore, the stubby little sheep-herder was humiliated with the shame of his unmerciful beating, and hungry for revenge. When the time came for the annual drive into the mountains, he was ready with his old dog Rex.

"Ou la la!" he cried, from his position behind the flock, "zat Callahan she's nevair mak fool from Jean la Jeannette twice. Yuh wait, yuh see. Deese time Jean she's got zat ole dog Rex. Hey? Yuh bet! We go up tuh zat Squirrel Lakes and see 'bout eet. And deese time we fool zat Callahan beeg!"

Four days later, Jean and the big flock had passed the Wilson Ranch at the lower levels, and were heading up the alder-studded bed of the mountain river. Once again Jean was under the spell of the Sierras, up in the regions where he had always been victorious. The wonder flock was spread out, feeding along the edges of the stream, moving slowly under the balmy skies. Over in the east the snow-caps thrust their white heads toward the heavens; the dog barked merrily, and all was well. Jean had been over the route so many times that he could have negotiated the drive with his eyes shut. The way led up the river bed, then to the ridges, along the crests, and finally onto the backbone of the mighty range. After that, he would reach the disputed region around the Squirrel Lakes, where he had been warned to look for trouble. Altogether, there was not a spot nor crevice for miles around that was not familiar to Jean la Jeannette.

But just at present Jean had nothing to worry about. He was still with the river and there were several days of peace ahead of him. Neither were there any signs of the dreaded Callahans. The days were long and happy, and the nights just as good; although, now and then, he could hear strange yelping noises, like a wolf pack rushing to a kill along the higher ridges beyond the river. But the sounds were distant and far away; and Jean did not associate them with the sheep-hating Callahans. A week passed by—two of them; and then at last he arrived at the spot where he proposed to turn up the ridge and climb to the heights of the great sierra. After that, he would spend the peak

of the summer among the beautiful meadows surrounding the Squirrel Lakes. It was about noon, and he had just turned the big flock into the tributary gulch, when he perceived a rider coming around the bend of the upper river. The man proved to be a friend of Bob Arnold—one of the former tenants of the Wilson Ranch, down in the foothills. But his first words were puzzling.

"Hey, Jean?" he called, pulling up. "Have yuh heard the news?"

And, of course, Jean had not. The newcomer was looking down at the flock and then up at the mountains. Jean patiently waited for him to light his pipe.

"Well," he went on, after he had pulled his first puff. "I seen yuh coming and I though I'd tell yuh, because I jest kaint make her-out. Sounds fishy; but it's so. The Callahans have gone intuh the sheep business."

Altogether, the news was astounding; so much so that Jean could do nothing but stand there with his mouth open. But at last he found words.

"Mon Dieu!" he exclaimed. "Zee Callahan—she go intuh zee sheep business? *Non, non, non!* She beega meestake. Not zat Callahan! Nevair! She's hate zat sheep. Zat Callahan she die, 'fore she raise one leetle lamb."

"It's a fact, nevertheless," came the decided answer. "Every bit of it. Bought thirty ewes from old Jake Brower. Tim Callahan, that young thug what's jest come home from a States prison, drove 'em intuh the mountains a month ago. What do yuh know about that?"

But Jean was thinking; the news was so impossible that he could only gape with wonder. What would the Callahans do with sheep? Certainly, their intentions had never been good. But what—— And then he heard the man talking again.

"Yep," he was saying. "And did yuh hear the wolves? There's a whole pack of something or other up in them higher mountains. I was up about twenty miles the other night, and the heights are full of 'em. I'd certainly 'a' hated tuh had any sheep. Yuh never heard such a din in all your life. Funny kind of wolves too—I wouldn't even swear what they are. But they're there; and they sure sound bloodthirsty."

Ten minutes later the man passed down the river, and Jean la Jeannette began the drive to the crest of the first long ridge; but from that moment on, he had something to think about. The Callahans raising sheep? It was absolutely unbelievable. There was a trick somewhere. Time and again he would stop to gaze back over the green of the magnificent canyon and the silver river threading the gorge, and on each occasion he would mutter:

"Non, non! She cannot be. Zat Callahan she's nevair keep one sheep. Not one. More lak she's tryin' for mak beega fool from zee sheepman. Eh?"

But that did not solve the riddle.

He kept on, and by sunset had camped on the old bedding ground above the Blue Water Springs. The moon came up, spreading its silvery light over the distant snowcaps. The dog rounded the sheep under the shelter of the birches and lay down by his old master, Jean la Jeannette. All went well, until along about ten o'clock. And then suddenly the herder felt the big dog stirring by his side, heard him growl. And when Rex uttered that kind of a sound something was sure to be in the offing. The sheep-herder leaped up.

"Ou la la!" he cried, grasping his gun. "What yuh call heem? Hey, Rex?"

There was no sound; but the dog bristled from head to foot; his nose was pointed toward the heights. Twice he looked up at Jean la Jeannette; and then he ran out a short way toward the flock. Simultaneously a blood-curdling racket drifted down the wind. It seemed to

come from the canyon, and then to float along the upper air.

Wolves! The terror of a bloodthirsty pack rushing to a kill! Wolves!

But at that moment Jean stopped to consider. He had known the mountains for many long years; and in all that time he could not recall the animals hunting in bands. Those days had gone long ago; and the wolves had learned their lesson. A pair was the most that hung together. And this sounded like a hundred. Jean had never listened to a more terrifying din in all his life. The old dog had broken into a frenzy of barking.

And still the sound kept growing closer, coming along the ridge, to stop at last with suggestive intermission. Then, it seemed to Jean that he could hear shots—some one firing—shots, and that yelps of fighting sheep dogs. After that, an ominous silence settled down again.

What could it be?

All through the night Jean la Jeannette waited, fearfully, sleeping scarcely a wink. The moon shone down on the big flock camped under the birches, with the great dog stirring uneasily along the sides. And not once during the dreadful night did the sheep dog Rex cease growling. Morning came, and Jean started up the mountains, carefully, slowly, and wondering what sort of terror lay ahead of him.

And about ten o'clock he found out.

He had just driven the pack through a groove of larch wood and was heading around a rocky point, when he beheld a flock moving slowly along the crest of the ridge.

And such a flock!

No dogs! Sheep crimson, maimed, and torn! A flock without cohesion and lacking all the semblance of a well-driven sheep pack. And behind it was a staggering sheep-herder, bewildered, stumbling, cursing, mumbling in a semi-delirium. Five minutes later, the two packs were together, the panic-stricken sheep merging among the others and settling down. The old dog Rex was smelling the crimson-stained wool and growling his hate; also, he was sniffing at the heights. Jean had aided the herder, restored him with a drink of stimulant and was now listening to his terrified warnings. The man was torn and wounded; he was pulling an improvised bandage from his face and exhibiting an ugly rip in his throat. How he had missed being killed was more than Jean could make out.

"Don't go, Jean la Jeannette," the injured man was saying in a quavering voice. "Don't go up. You lose every one dem sheep if yuh do. She de mischief for sure. Yuh get killed. I know, because las' night he come. One hunderd wolf—bigger'n dat!" He held his hand up above his hip by way of demonstration. "And dat wolf he start killin' my sheeps. My dog fight, but he get killed like dat." He snapped his fingers. "One dozen wolf, he jump my dog. Tear him intuh pieces. So! And I try for shoot 'em off wid six-gun. No use. Dat wolf he's too many—too many hunderd. Looks like he's more'n a million. I tell yuh! And it's moonlight and I kin see that wolf runnin' all over. But I don't get no good shot. And preety soon I ain't got no more shells. And I fight wid bigga club. But he's too big, dat wolf. He jumps and grabs my throat. I preety near die; but I pull da knife and stick it intuh heem. After dat, he runs off. And I fall down. I don't know nottings until dis mornin'. And den I'm preety near dead. And I see da sheep—dead ones everywhere. All bleeding. Dat wolf, each one he kills twenty sheep mebbe. Lose half da flock. And dat wolf is hunderd of heem for sure. Yuh don't go no more, Jean la Jeannette. More better yuh turn back for valley."

Altogether, it was the most disconcerting news that Jean had ever heard.

There was no doubting the sheep-herder's story. And there was no chance of survival, if he kept on toward the lakes. Also, he was thinking about his big dog Rex. Rex would fight to the last drop of blood; but against odds of this sort he would not have a chance. And yet, Jean la Jeannette was loath to turn back. Nor could he understand the wolf pack. And still he was thinking of the Callahans. Strange that all this should happen just after the renegades had purchased the sheep! And even if he should turn back, what was to prevent the wolves from coming along with the fall of night?

Not a thing.

Hence it was up to Jean la Jeannette to think a way out, which, after all, did not take him long. It was only ten o'clock; he had many hours of daylight still before him. And Jean knew the mountains better than any man in the country. Suddenly he whistled to his dog and waved him toward the augmented flock. The pack undulated and began moving up the ridge again. Jean spoke to the protesting herder.

"*Non, non!*" he answered decisively. "We no go down country. We go up. But we fool zat wolf plenty. Yuh wait; yuh see."

But this time Jean did not stay with the main ridge; instead he took a cross one, followed it for a mile, and then turned into another canyon that seemed to descend from a strange-looking sugar-loaf mountain. Soon they were climbing from the bottom of a gorge, along the sides of a rushing torrent, a place where only a man like Jean could have put the sheep. Old Rex was in his glory; driving, twisting, and turning the flock up toward the heights. It was a place of cascades and falling waters; rocks, boulders, and mighty cliffs bordered the sides. Sometimes it was necessary to string the sheep out in single file—up the tiny trail to a shelf on the side of the mountain.

And then, at last, a strange thing happened.

They had come to a tunnel-like opening in the side of the wall—a place where only a few sheep could pass at a time. The bells tinkled along the sides, and the pattering of many feet echoed from the rocky caverns. When the last sheep was through, Jean assisted his comrade into the opening. Three minutes later, they came back into broad daylight and the soft smell of tender verdure. Said Jean la Jeannette:

"Ou la la! Dis ees one volcano. W'at ze monsieur calls zee crater. And she's safe place for sheep. We fool zat wolf to-night. Mebbeso we fool zat Callahan also."

Certainly, it was a splendid place for the flock. The crater was a half a mile across, with hundred-foot cliffs leading straight down from the sides; and with only one exit—the narrow passage where they had driven the sheep. It was still two hours till sunset. Jean spoke again.

"Yuh write zee letter, eh? I mean, yuh know how for write wiz pencil, hey?"

But the other shook his head; whereupon Jean went to work, first selecting a piece of pine and then whittling it to writing smoothness. From his pocket he pulled a box of matches, lighting them one by one, and allowing the ends to burn down to charcoal tips. After that, he began drawing wolves, many of them, across the sides of the smoothed-out pine—strange creatures to be sure; but not to be mistaken. When it was all done, he called his dog Rex to his side and fastened the wood securely to his collar.

"So," he explained to his companion, "now we mak fools of zat wolf. Yuh bet! We need help, and so Jean's goin' for send zat dog tuh zee monsieur. And zat dog she will travel all zee night. And to-morrow zee monsieur will read 'bout zat wolf and come wiz many mans. So."

It was not the first time that Rex had done the trick; he wagged his stub of a tail as Jean la Jeannette patted him on the head. Then at the behest of his master, he trotted into the cut, looked back over his shaggy shoulder, and disappeared.

After that, Jean began constructing a barrier across the cut, dragging brush, and filling it in with rocks. By the time night had fallen, the way into the crater had been barred completely.

Two sheep-herders and two guns. Behind such a fortification, they could render a good account of themselves. And, sure enough, they had their opportunity about four hours after sundown. Jean was waiting, when the sounds began coming in from the outside—the eager yelps of the sheep-killers. No doubt they were scenting the trail up the canyon. Finally they came closer; and at last they could hear the pattering of wolfish feet along the floor of the passage—punctuated by the eager whimpering of the head killer. But Jean was ready; so was his companion.

Bang! Bang! Bang bang!

Now came streaks of fire from the deadly six-guns, followed by the roar of the echoing walls and the terrified yelps of the frightened beasts. From the depths of the rocky darkness the two sheep-herders could hear the snapping whines of the runaway killers—many of them. Then from the outside, they heard the howl of puzzled disappointment. The sheep-herder by Jean's side was happy.

"Dat fix 'em" he cried gleefully. "Dat fix 'em for sure. Jean la Jeannette, yuh got mighty fine head. Hey? We eat up all dat wolf at one shot. Yuh bet."

Twice again the sounds came into the cavern, but each time the shots were repeated. The killers gave it up, but only for an hour or so. And then they began stalking along the rim of the crater's edge, howling their disappointment and peering down. The sheep-herders watched their forms silhouetted against the moonlight.

But next day another puzzler came to Jean la Jeannette. The sheep-killers had disappeared along toward morning; but about two in the afternoon, something else showed up along the rim. A man's head appeared among the rocks—looking down.

A Callahan!

Jean gave an exclamation and pointed. Now he was certain. It had been the Callahans all along. Not once had he doubted. Only, so far, he had failed to pick up the connection. The head disappeared, and there were no more signs; but Jean knew they were in for trouble. The wolves would return; and this time the human brutes by the name of Callahan would assist them. That made Jean think of old Rex, and of how long it would take Bob Arnold to reach the crater. The dog would lead him up, of that he was certain. But could Jean hold out?

The answer to that came in rather a negative fashion.

Once again, the killers came back; this time about midnight. And once again Jean and his companion were ready. But this time they had human foes to deal with as well as wolves. Neither Jean nor his friend had solved the secret of the man on the rim; consequently, they did not look for a man sliding down on a rope—two men, in fact—and hiding in the darkness. Instead, Jean and his companion were waiting for the oncoming killers, and their backs were turned to the two shadows stealing through the darkness! Two blows upon the heads of the sheep-herders, and a cackle of triumph came from Tim Callahan.

"That's done pretty! Now, let the brutes through, and we'll go over and watch the end of Bob Arnold's sheep pack!"

But therein Tim Callahan made his one big mistake. He should have remained at the barrier. He had failed to take into consideration the wily ways of an old sheep-herder. The trouble started with Jean lying on his back. But it did not continue, for more than a few minutes. At that very instant, Bob Arnold and a dozen men, with a great many dogs, were hurrying along the passage. They were just in time! And now, Rex the sheep dog was a berserker killer all by himself. Bob Arnold was holding the passage. He was giving orders.

"Somebody's inside this crater!" he exclaimed. "Get 'em, and get 'em good! They plugged Jean and Manuel, and they can't escape except through this passage."

Streaks of fire! Fighting dogs, and sputtering six-guns! The Callahans had turned and were running for the shelter of some boulders along the crater's far side. One of Arnold's men saw them. There was more shooting! Then a foam rolling over in the moonlight. A yell from the wounded man and surrender! But the sheep-killers were putting up a different battle—the floor of the crater was alive with conflicts; sheep dogs were swarming all over it. And old Rex was killing, killing! Occasionally, a sheepman would rush in with a gun butt and knock a huge form on the head. And at last came the end—two killers fleeing toward the entrance, with the sheep dogs pursuing in a solid pack. Bob Arnold got one, and the dogs caught the other. They fairly swarmed over him, tearing him to pieces. Then came a call from the sheepman:

"Yeh! Yeh! Well, here's the answer. Police dogs. Sure as shooting! Hey, you fellows over there!"

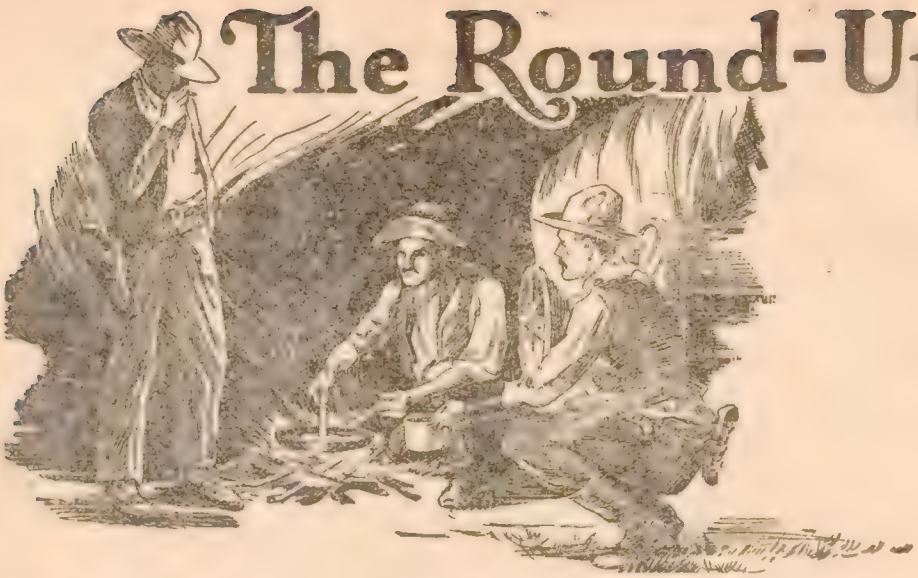
Some one was bringing in the man who had surrendered; the fellow was gibbering with terror; but he was explaining, nevertheless.

"Sure!" he was saying. "But if yuh don't shoot, I'll tell it all. No, it wasn't wolves at all. And I ain't a Callahan. I just work for 'em. I chum with Tim Callahan—the one who come home from the pen. It was him who thought it out. To get police dogs and make killers out of 'em. Yeh! Said they was only two steps from a wolf, anyway. That was his idea. Bought about thirty of 'em. And that was why he purchased those sheep. Killed one of 'em and fed it tuh the dogs raw. Then he let them slaughter the rest one by one. Wouldn't feed 'em unless they did it. Made 'em intuh the worst kind of sheep killers. Then he turned them loose on the sheep packs. Said they'd clean up on every flock in the mountains, and that there wouldn't be a thing on us because they was only dogs. And if we'd 'a' stayed away, we'd 'a' been all right. But Tim simply had tuh see the fun. And now just look where it's got us!"

That was about all; except an hour or so later when Jean sat up in Bob Arnold's arms. He had heard the story, and he was smiling happily. Old Rex was licking his face.

"So," Jean was saying. "Zat kinda wolf call was funny. Sure! And zat man by zee river he did not know, either. But eet was ze Callahan. Hey? Zat makes heem square for Jean la Jeannette. Yuh bet!"

The Round-Up



LAST week we spent the entire Round-up with one long gun battle. We have just been able to get the smoke out of our nose and eyes, and our ears have just commenced to get back their usual good hearing.

This being thus, not a gun can be drawn at this particular meeting. As a matter of fact, as you all well know, we saw to it that all guns were checked at the chuck wagon, before any of you were allowed into the firelight.

Yes, both sirs and ladies, any who takes a shot at this old bald head——But you know the rest of it.

So, after hearing from a few of you, we'll sing and sing and sing for the rest of the evening.

Rides up now, "California Cowgirl":

"BOSS AND FOLKS: Will some of you move over a little to let a little fourteen-year-old cowgirl from California have a seat? Thanks! Here's what I have to say:

"I've ridden a horse ever since I was a little tot three or four years old, and by this time can ride with the best of them, but what I have to say doesn't concern my riding ability. I have read WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE for four years, and no other magazine I have ever read can compare with it.

"I like the Geraldi stories best of all and wish Max Brand would write more of them. Some people, perhaps, don't like superhuman stories, but I know so much Western stuff now that Max Brand's stories appeal to me. Good luck, Max!

"Ray Humphrey's 'Shorty' McKay stories are fine, but to my notion, Roland Krebs' are a shade better. At any rate, Max Brand, Roland Krebs, and Ray Humphrey, are my favorites.

"Thanks for listening, and three cheers for WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE!

"Kindness to horses pays always, and I know what I'm talking about."

Into the saddle swings "Jackie," from Monument, Oregon, with "Three cheers for the Round-up. Whoopie!"

"BOSS AND FOLKS: Say, you flea-bitten jack rabbit, move over and get your elbows out of my ribs. You want to know where I hail from? Oregon—that sagebrushy, rattlesnaky State of Oregon—and I'm proud of *it*!

"A certain fellow by the name of

George Gilbert certainly knows how to write stories. 'Tenderfoot and Iron Man' is about the best I've ever read. Also, John Frederick should be patted on the back for writing that thrilling story, 'Chinook.'

"You want me to pull my freight? Just wait a minute, I'm not through chawin' the rag yet.

"Do you know the song that starts out like this: 'I'm just a Texas Cowboy, Strayed off the Texas Range. My job is cinchin' saddles——'?

"That's all I know of it, and I wish you and the boys would sing it for me.

"Well, I'll dismount and let somebody else take my place."

Praise from Fort Worth, Texas. Gene White rides up with it:

"BOSS AND FOLKS: I have been reading our magazine for, lo, these many years, and I don't think I have missed a copy in the last fifteen years.

"I think we have a fine staff of writers, my favorites being Max Brand, Ray Humphreys, Cherry Wilson, Robert Horton, and George Owen Baxter—and last, but not least, my friend, Robert Ormond Case. His Windy and Lonesome stories are the best I have ever read—that is, they appeal to me. I only wish every issue carried a story of his. I see where some one said these stories didn't appeal to them, so that's why I rise up to speak in behalf of Mr. Case. I think they are the best in the magazine."

It's mighty kind and thoughtful of Mrs. G. A. Bachman, to come here this evenin', all the way from Lumenburg, Nova Scotia, Canada, with this

"GOOD BOSS AND FOLKS: My husband and I are interested readers of 'our magazine,' and enjoy very much all the departments. At a recent meeting we noticed a request for two songs, one of which we happen to know. Here is one of the songs, all that I know of it, at least:

IN THE SHADOW OF THE PINES

"We wandered in the shadow of the pines, my love and I,
As the wind was blowing freshly from the sea;
But a sudden fitful darkness stole across the summer sky,
And a shadow came between my love and me.
Some hasty words were spoken, and then almost unawares,
Hasty answers to unthinking anger led,
And our heartsick bitter longing, and our weeping and our prayers,
Ne'er can make those false and cruel words unsaid.

Chorus

"Come back to me, sweetheart, and love me as before,
Come back, back to me, sweetheart, and leave me nevermore;
In life's dull pathway the sun no longer shines,
Come, love, and meet me in the shadow of the pines."

Now, folks, doesn't that make you feel like bustin' right out with another song? Next let's have:

LACKEY BILL.

Come, all you good old boys, and listen to my rhymes,
We are west of eastern Texas and mostly men of crimes;
Each with a hidden secret well smothered in his breast,
Which brought us out to Mexico, way out here in the West.

My parents raised me tenderly—they had no child but me—
Till I began to ramble and with them could never agree.
My mind being bent on rambling did grieve their poor hearts sore,
To leave my aged parents them to see no more.

I was borned and raised in Texas, though never come to fame,
A cowboy by profession, C. W. King by name.

Oh, when the war was ended I did not like to work;
My brothers were not happy, for I had learned to shirk.

In fact, I was not able; my health was very bad.
I had no constitution; I was nothing but a lad.
I had no education, I would not go to school,
And living off my parents I thought it rather cool.

So I set a resolution to travel to the West;
My parents they objected, but still I thought it best.
It was out on the Seven Rivers, all out on the Pecos stream,
It was there I saw a country I thought just suited me.

I thought I would be no stranger and lead a civil life;
In order to be happy would choose myself a wife.
On one Sabbath evening in the merry month of May
To a little country singing I happened there to stray.

It was there I met a damsel I never shall forget;
The impulse of that moment remains within me yet.
We soon became acquainted, I thought she would fill the bill;
She seemed to be good natured, which helps to climb the hill.

She was a handsome figure, though not so very tall;
Her hair was red as blazes—I hate it worst of all.
I saw her home one evening in the presence of her pap;
I bid them both good evening with a note left in her lap.

And when I got an answer I read it with a rush;
I found she had consented—my feelings was a hush.
But now I have changed my mind, boys, I am sure I wish her well.
Here's to that precious jewel, I'm sure I wish her well.

This girl was Miss Mollie Walker who fell in love with me;
She was a lovely Western girl, as lovely as could be;
She was so tall, so handsome, so charming and so fair,
There is not a girl in this whole world with her I could compare.

She said my pockets would be lined with gold, hard work then I'd leave o'er
If I'd consent to live with her and say I'd roam no more.
My mind began to ramble and it grieved my poor heart sore
To leave my darling girl, her to see no more.

I asked if it made any difference if I crossed o'er the plains;
She said it made no difference if I returned again.
So we kissed, shook hands, and parted; I left that girl behind.
She said she'd prove true to me till death proved her unkind.

I rode in the town of Vagus, all in the public square;
The mail coach had arrived, the post boy met me there.
He handed me a letter that gave me to understand
That the girl I loved in Texas had married another man.

So I read a little further and found those words were true.
I turned myself all around, not knowing what to do.
I'll sell my horse, saddle, and bridle; cow driving I'll resign;
I'll search this world from town to town for the girl I left behind.

Here the gold I find in plenty, the girls to me are kind;
But my pillow is haunted with the girl I left behind.
It's trouble and disappointment is all that I can see,
For the dearest girl in all the world has gone square back on me.

Miss Helen Rivers, who conducts this department, will see to it that you will be able to make friends with other readers, though thousands of miles may separate you. It must be understood that Miss Rivers will undertake to exchange letters only between men and men, boys and boys, women and women, girls and girls. Letters will be forwarded direct when correspondents so wish; otherwise they will be answered here. Be sure to inclose forwarding postage when sending letters through The Hollow Tree.

SOUTH of the Gila River country and north of the border line of old Mexico is the mountain-mining district of southeastern Arizona. In the Mule Mountains are the red-gold mines of the Southwest.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: Located in the Mule Mountains in southeastern Arizona is the copper-mining district. There, just north of the Old Mexican border, north of Sonora, are some of the richest and biggest copper mines in the good old U. S. A. And they are working full speed ahead.

Folks, I have a promising mining claim here, in a new territory about twenty-eight miles from the railroad, and I'm aiming to take in a pard to work this little prospect with me. I'd like to find the hombre who knows the old-style mining, and who has his own car. The prospect sure is a promising one, pards, and there is plenty of water close by. Get your pens to scratching, old-timers. I want to hear from you-all. C. K.

Box 213, Bisbee, Arizona.

Stock riders.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: Any one want to know about the life of Australian stock riders and Australian rodeos? I'm a young lad of nineteen, and have been on my own since the age of twelve. I've heard that there are a great many cattle ranches out in southern Alberta, Canada, and I'm hoping that some of the cowboys will write and tell me about the chances of becoming a cow hand out that way. I would like to hear from some of the top-hand riders and ropers.

DENNY BINNIE.

Care of Telford's Station, Te Karaka, Gisborne, New Zealand.

Trekker of the trails.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: Have you a small corner for a trekker of the trails? I have trekked over the trails of the pioneers of the West, and from coast to coast, and from border to border. I spent four years in California, where I visited the old missions around San Diego, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, and Sacramento. Sant Fe and Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Prescott, Phoenix, and Tucson, Arizona, are wonder cities of the Southwest. Santa Fe and Albuquerque are typical Southwestern towns, with their narrow streets and adobe houses. At Prescott are the granite dells, and at Phoenix is the Roosevelt Dam. At Tucson are the cactus forests and picture rocks. Tucson is an old Pueblo town.

Then I took the trail through Utah and northward to Cheyenne, where I watched the cowboys come into town. I have met

some of the old-timers of Colorado and have listened to the yarns of old prospectors. And now, folks, I would like to yarn with some of you-all. I am Scotch-Irish, and thirty.

WILLARD F. MCCREA.

Community Hospital, Boulder, Colorado.

Utah hombre.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I can tell you folks about city life or ranch life. I know both. I was born and raised in Salt Lake City, but I've done considerable work on ranches and have ridden a lot of horses and can handle a rope first-rate. I'm twenty-three, folks, and out to lasso a few Pen Pals.

ROY CARTY.

246 Twenty-sixth Street, Ogden, Utah.

Canadian West.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: This is where the Canadian west begins. Fifteen miles to the west of us are the prairies, and fifteen miles to the east are the big woods of Manitoba. I am one of the rambling hombres who had seen quite a bit of the world before I was twenty-one, and I expect to do a heap more rambling before I reach the quarter-of-a-century mark. I've been West as far as Calgary, Alberta, and South as far as the Panhandle of the Longhorn State. I expect to trek the West and the Northwestern trails muy pronto, folks, and want to hear from you-all, especially you hombres hailing from British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona.

WILLIAM TOEWS.

R R 1, Box 28, St. Anne, Manitoba, Canada.

Oregoners.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: Can any one tell us about drawing lots for homesteads? And are there any hombres who can tell us about Alaska, and especially about Ketchikan? I am a sailor, and if we can't get on a homestead or ranch, I would like to get on a fishing boat at Ketchikan. OREGONER.

Box 432, Powers, Oregon.

On the Gulf of Mexico.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: We are devoted to the life of the great open spaces, and like to ride and hunt. We live way down South, on the Gulf of Mexico, where there is spring and summer nearly every month in the year. White gold—cotton—is picked in the fields of Louisiana, and a field of snow-white cotton, folks, is a lovely sight.

We would like to hear from some one who lives on a big cattle ranch, so, folks, won't some of you Westerners write to a couple of lonely Southerners?

MRS. G. C. H.

Care of The Tree.

North of Sonora, Old Mexico, are the Mule Mountains of Arizona. Old-timers are prospecting new mines in the Mule Mountain country. Send for your friend-maker badge and yarn with the old-time prospectors of the Southwest.

Twenty-five cents in coin or stamps sent to The Hollow Tree Department, Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City, will bring you either the pin style or the button for the coat lapel. In ordering, be sure to state which you wish.

Homesteader's daughter.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I was raised on a homestead in Alberta, Canada, and I almost lived in the saddle from the age of three until I was thirteen. We are now living in a crowded city of a hundred and fifty thousand, and I get a wee bit lonesome for the quiet of the Northwest trails. I love to ride, hunt, fish, and hike. I have seen quite a bit of the United States and Canada, and will especially enjoy yarning with girls in the Western States—girls about my age, which is nineteen. Wyoming, Colorado, Arizona, and Texas are States I am most eager to hear from. LENORE PARKER.

121 East Dewey Street, Flint, Michigan.

Canyon County.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I have just come west to Canyon County, in southwestern Idaho. I came West overland from Missouri, my home State, and came through Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, and Oregon. That is a beautiful country that I traveled through, and I am eager to hear from folks living in any of these States.

HARLEY DAWSON.

Route 2, Parma, Idaho.

Taos.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: North of Santa Fe, in the Sangre de Christos of New Mexico, is Taos. Do you-all want to hear about the county seat of Taos County, in the glorious Southwest? Just pen a line muy pronto. Cowgirls, saddle your broncs and take a *pasear* over Taos way. LOUISE COX.
Box 398, Taos, New Mexico.

"I want to hear from cowboys in Arizona and Texas," says L. G. Gordon, Box 271, Norfolk, Virginia. This Gangster can ride and rope, and wants to learn to be a cowboy.

"Any more room in the old Holla? I'm from Illinois, and I can tell you-all about almost any place inside the State boundaries. I have a lot of snapshots to exchange with some one, so come on, hombres, and fill the mail box." This hombre is twenty-two. Address him as Lonesome Illinois Lad, Care of The Tree.

"I am an English girl of sixteen, and I have been around the world one and a half times. Of all the places I've visited I like western Canada the best. I hope some day to visit the States, and would like to hear from some Western cowgirls or any others from way back in the wilds of the West. I have spent my life in the country, and am very fond of horseback riding." This is Tasmanian Lassie, whose address is Care of The Tree.

David Learn, R. D. 2, Clymer, Pennsylvania, is a seventeen-year-old hombre who likes hunting, fishing, boxing, wrestling, and all kinds of outdoor sports. He is looking for a crowded mail box.

"This eighteen-year-old hombre is going West soon and would like to hear from Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, or any other Western States," says George Krisanda, 100 West Hartford Street, Ashley, Pennsylvania.

"I live in northwestern Iowa, where the tall corn grows," says seventeen-year-old Mary Michelson. Her address is Fostoria, Iowa.

"My daughter and I would like to locate on a ranch somewhere in the West," says Mrs. M. A., of Dallas, Texas. Address her in care of The Tree. The young miss is twenty-one.

"I would like to hear from ranch girls, or any one who would care to write a lonely girl of sixteen," says Eva Geizer, Fair View P. O., Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

"Maricopa County, in central Arizona, is my home, folks, and I hope you-all will want to hear about this beautiful country first-hand. I am sixteen, and would like to hear from the girls who are twenty or younger." This Gangster is Mary Lively, Lock Box 362, Glendale, Arizona.

Mark Fredenburg, care of Koch Hospital, Koch, Missouri, is twenty-seven, and is looking for a lot of new Pen Pals.

"Owing to poor health, I have been advised to go West to Arizona. I would like to get in touch with some rancher who could use a man who knows all about keeping books and handling correspondence. I wish nothing more than a bunk house and chuck, and plenty of work to occupy my mind. I will hope to receive a few letters from the ranchers of the open country of Arizona." This Gangster is Harry Bell, 512 West 13th Street, Kansas City, Missouri.

"I live on a farm just out of San Antonio, Texas, and take care of my invalid sister. I am only nineteen, and very lonely, and need a lot of Pen Pals to cheer me up." This sister Gangster is Mary Helen Delgodod, R. F. D. 1, Box 33, San Antonio, Texas.

WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

by John North

It is our aim in this department to be of genuine practical help and service to those who wish to make use of it. Don't hesitate to write to us and give us the opportunity of assisting you to the best of our ability.

Address all communications to John North, care of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

THE Treasure State seems to be attracting a lot of folks these days. Nor can we wonder, for there, where the citizens are still wrestling with primeval forces, the man with the pioneer spirit will find an outlet for all his energies. Montana has much to offer the red-blooded hombre, as Nat B., of Nashville, Tennessee, has discovered.

"I'm one of those lanky, tough mountaineers you have doubtless read about, Mr. North," writes this Southerner, "and the city is no place for me. For some years I've been planning to trek Westward, and now the time has arrived. I'm keen to do a little pioneering, and have been told that Madison County out in Montana will give me the chance I'm looking for. What can you tell me about this section, as to location, industries, and opportunities? I'm especially interested in stock raising and would like to do some big-game hunting on the side."

Nat has given us a mighty big order, for there's much to be said for this section of Montana. Madison might, in fact, be called the parent county of the State, for while the original discovery of gold was elsewhere, it was the finding of the rich diggings on Alder Gulch that brought the first rush of people to the territory and led to the development of the entire region. A half century ago Madison County was solely a mining region. To-day, however, it ranks among the leaders in stock raising and crop production, as well as in mining.

Madison County is situated in southwestern Montana, on the eastern side of the Rocky Mountains, the crest of which forms part of its border in the southern corner on the Montana-Idaho boundary. It extends north to the Jefferson River, touches the Big Hole River on the west and on the east, and takes in most of the Madison Range of mountains. It is a region of mountains and long, well-watered valleys, whose general course is north and south. The valleys range in elevation from four thousand two hundred to five thousand feet. The princi-

pal ones are the Madison, Jefferson, Ruby, Beaverhead, Big Hole, and the South Boulder. There are more than one hundred and fifteen thousand acres of irrigated land in the county and it is estimated that an additional sixty thousand acres can be irrigated at reasonable cost.

Nat will find that stock raising is the leading industry out there, with large ranches and large-scale production as a rule. More than a fourth of the county is included within the national forests, which, with an additional one hundred and eighty thousand acres of unreserved public domain, and an abundance of springs and streams, provide ideal summer grazing. In the higher valleys, better adapted to alfalfa and wild hay than to other crops, the home ranches of most of the stock outfits are usually found.

The lower valleys and benches of the county are devoted mostly to general farming. Wheat, oats, barley, and rye all produce good yields. Madison County oats are in demand for cereal purposes. Hardy varieties of corn are grown in a number of districts. Soil and climate are favorable to potato raising; about one thousand acres being cultivated for commercial purposes. There is a trend toward diversified farming that includes milk, cows, hogs, and poultry. While soil types vary, a deep alluvial soil predominates, with some heavy clays and gravel in places. In the northern part of the county, near Harrison, there is some non-irrigated farming, but irrigated farming is the rule.

Madison County is also rich in mineral wealth. The Tobacco Root Mountains, running north and south through the middle of the county, between the Ruby and Madison Rivers, are among the most highly mineralized regions in the West, but no deep development has been done. There is, however, scarcely a district in the county that has not produced some sort of mineral output.

Nat may be interested in hearing about the transportation facilities, which are always important. The northern part of the county is served by the main lines of the Northern Pacific and the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul. The western part of the county is served by a branch line of the Northern Pacific from Whitehall, south through the Jefferson and Ruby Valleys to Alder, which is near the geographical center of the county.

The eastern district, through the Madison Valley, is tapped by another Northern Pacific branch out of Sappington, which forks at Harrison, one fork going to Pony and the other to Norris. There is a big and promising district in the south end of the county whose development is retarded by lack of transportation. A highway connecting with the West Yellowstone entrance to the Yellowstone Park runs north up the Madison to a junction with a main east-and-west highway via Butte. At Ennis this road connects with another highway that swings west through Virginia City, and thence north through Sheridan and Twin Bridges to Whitehall.

Twin Bridges, on the western side of the county, is the largest town, and a few miles south of it lies Sheridan, the second largest. Ennis, in a stock-growing region, is the largest town on the eastern or Madison River side. On the lower Madison are Pony, Harrison, and Norris. The latter is the terminus of the branch line railroad up the Madison and a distributing and shipping point for a large territory. Virginia City, situated in almost the exact geographical center of the county, was the first incorporated city in the territory, and was for a number of years the territorial capital. Waterloo, in the northwestern part, is a shipping point for a good agricultural district. Adjacent to most of these towns are mining districts.

Many sportsmen consider that the

finest trout fishing in the United States is to be had in Madison County. Nat will also find good big-game hunting. There are four hot springs in the county. And if Nat is interested in the early history of the West, he will find many spots worth a visit, such as the Road Agents' Cemetery at Virginia City; the Robbers' Roost on Ramshorn Creek, and the collection of relics and curios in the Thompson Memorial Library at Virginia City.

Altogether, we would say that this section offers many opportunities. And that's what we are all looking for, whether the search is made in the Northwest or the Southwest. The latter region is calling D. G. U., of Providence, Rhode Island. "Can you give me some general information, Mr. North, about the State of New Mexico? What does it offer the newcomer? I'm looking for a warmer climate and have been advised to investigate the Sunshine State."

Well, the grand old State of New Mexico has much to attract the newcomer, for it offers a variety of opportunities. It has agriculture, with corn and grain raising in the north, and cotton in the south. It has the world beaten for beans, alfalfa, and forage crops. Its ranges are wide, and the cattlemen and sheepmen are prospering. It has a wonderful variety of minerals, from coal to gold, and from copper to silver. Its mines employ thousands. It also has large oil-producing districts, with a steady yearly output. And if sunshine is what D. G. U. is looking for, he'll find plenty of it down there. It seems to us that's a record that it would be hard to beat.

Speaking of New Mexico naturally reminds us of its neighbor, the Lone Star State, about which Max O., of Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, Central America, is rather keen. I'm sure all you folks will be interested not only in hearing his remarks about Central America, but will also be glad to give him any information you have as to likely spots for him to settle upon on his return to the United States.

"This section of tropical Central America on the Caribbean side is a rough and wild country, Mr. North. I figure it must be about two hundred years in arrears of civilization. Being revolution-ridden almost constantly, and practically without any home industry, it is no fit place in which to establish a permanent home. I am, therefore, thinking of moving to southern or western Texas.

"Now, if anybody acquainted with conditions in the Lone Star State could recommend a thriving, orderly, little town for me to settle down in, I certainly should feel obliged. Any hints the readers of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE are kind enough to give me will be welcome. I am thirty-nine years of age, and have spent fifteen of them in Central America. Now I'm tired of roaming around and experimenting. I am a dealer in general merchandise by profession and speak and write the Spanish language fluently.

"As I am a passionate lover of nature and the great outdoors, I am speculating on locating in a small, hospitable, agricultural town. For any help toward reaching this goal, I should be immensely grateful.

"Come on, hombres, won't you give a greenhorn a helping hand?"

How about it? All letters addressed to Max O., in care of this department, will be sent to him pronto.

MISSING

This department conducted in duplicate in DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE and WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE, thus giving readers double service, is offered free of charge to our readers. Its purpose is to aid them in getting in touch with persons of whom they have lost track.

While it will be better to use your name in the notice, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send us a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that these persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

Now, readers, help those whose friends or relatives are missing, as you would like to be helped if you were in a similar position.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to any one who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

EASBY, FRANK and **ROY.**—Frank served with the Canadians in France, and Roy with the English Royal Engineers. Information appreciated by their brother, Jack, who is now in the United States, care of this magazine.

ANDERSON, LILLIAN RYAN.—Last heard from in Hampstead, Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1924. Please write to Louisa, now Mrs. W. Barrett, care of Mrs. G. E. Day, 4 Margetts Courts, Wauldham, Kent, England.

FEARS, BELLE, nee **ASBERY.**—Five feet three inches tall, blue eyes, and brown hair. Last heard from in Louisville, Kentucky. Information appreciated by her son, Bayliss Fears, 4917 Bunkum Road, East St. Louis, Illinois.

ATTENTION.—Would like to hear from members of Company A, Second Engineres, who were stationed at Camp Travis, Texas, from 1921 to 1923. Address C. W. B., care of this magazine.

HARRIS, DANIEL.—Of Georgia. Served in the infantry, at Camp Travis, Texas, in 1923. Please write to C. W. B., care of this magazine.

HARSFELD, WALTER E.—Information appreciated by his sick mother, Mrs. John Harsfeld, R. R. 2, Box 59, Malvern, Arkansas.

CURLY, CHARLIE.—I still love you. Please write to L. W., care of this magazine.

J.—Fix everything and come home. I am heartbroken. I still love you. Please write to L., care of this magazine.

HELLER, JOHNNIE.—Twenty-nine years old. Five feet, ten inches tall, blue eyes and dark hair. Was discharged from the army in 1923, after serving four years in the Philippine Islands. Believed to be in Aberdeen, Washington. Information appreciated by Estelle Heller, Butte, Montana.

SCHUMACHER, JOHN E.—Your children need you. Please write to L. V. S., care of this magazine.

HUGHES, PAT.—Left Rhode Island, in the early '90s, for Washington. Last heard from, in 1905, in Oregon. Information appreciated by his sister, Mrs. Ellen Mullaly, 14 Cherry Street, Woonsocket, Rhode Island.

TAYLOR, JAMES.—Five feet, seven inches tall, and weighs one hundred and sixty pounds. A ship worker. Formerly of St. Catherine Street, Montreal, Canada. Missing since 1920. Last heard from in Harrisonbury, Virginia. Have news to his advantage. Information appreciated by Bill, care of this magazine.

MONTGOMERY, RENA.—Left Tucson, Arizona, about eight years ago. Believed to be in Texas. Information appreciated by an old friend, Robert Williams, Box 626, Phoenix, Arizona.

ELSON or **LISSACK, MRS. JOHN K.,** nee **KATE S. GRECK.**—Twenty-two years old. Five feet, two inches tall, weighs one hundred and thirty pounds, dark-brown hair, and fair complexion. Last heard from in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Information appreciated by John K. Lissack, Ladywood, Manitoba, Canada.

DAVIS, MRS. VIRGINIA C.—Daughter of James Henry Hodges. Advertised for relatives of her father, and gave her address as Box 836, Little River Station, Miami, Florida. Please write to D. F. Ritz, 9 Bible House, New York City.

BERNSTEIN, ABE, and wife, **FREDIA,** and son, **JOE.**—Information appreciated by their cousin, Charles Bau, 336 East One Hundred and Second Street, New York City.

MASON, JOHN F.—About eighty years old. Believed to be in Texas. Information appreciated by his niece, Mrs. W. H. Ink, Montrose, California.

TUTTLE, VINCENT.—Thirty-nine years old. Last heard from in Los Angeles, California. I have important news for you. Please write to Hilda, care of this magazine.

WELISE, HENRY A.—Formerly of Albany, Missouri. Was at one time in the Veterinary Hospital, Fort Bliss, Texas. Last heard from in El Paso, Texas, en route for Las Cruces, New Mexico. Information appreciated by George H. Stiles, Box 541, Fort Bliss, Texas.

HORN, MR. and **MRS. GEORGE,** and children, **BONNIE** and **FERMAN.**—Last heard from in Bunch, Oklahoma. Please write to Mrs. J. H. Flud, Sierra Vista Ranch, Delano, California.

TAYLOR, ROBERT.—Married Polly Flud. Last heard from in Oklahoma. Information appreciated by Mrs. J. H. Flud, Sierra Vista Ranch, Delano, California.

McANDERSON, JACK.—Please write for letter held at this office, from Paul.

BROWN, JOHN N.—Six feet, three inches tall, fair complexion, blue eyes, and blond hair. Was in Sweetwater, Texas, in 1928. Please write to your mother, Mrs. Kelly Brown, 1009 Twentieth Street, Cleveland, Tennessee.

DAVID JAY.—We will not force you to come home, but every one forgives you and loves you. Please write to Mother, care of this magazine.

DIAMOND, HENRY JOHN.—Thirty-seven years old. Left County Derry, Ireland, sixteen years ago. Worked in North Carolina. Was in Rumford, Maine, twelve years ago. Believed to be still in Maine. Information appreciated by his brother, Paul Diamond, 3 West One Hundred and First Street, New York City.

PILGRIM, JOHN W.—Please write to Raffie, care of this magazine.

SCHMIDT, HENRY.—Every one is well at home. Would like to hear from you. Please write to Raymond Schmidt, 1024 Lincoln Avenue, Duquesne, Pennsylvania.

ROBERTSON, MARION.—Left Kentucky in 1877. Last heard from in Texas. Information concerning him, or his descendants, appreciated by his cousin, Neal Porter, Box 522, Sidney, Montana.

CADDEL, CLARK.—Seventeen years old. Last seen in Frederick, Oklahoma. Believed to have gone to west Texas. Information appreciated by his sister, Eunice Caddel, care of this magazine.

DE WITT, DORIS.—My letters to you at Fort Stockton, Texas, returned unclaimed. We need you. Please come home, or write to Annie, care of this magazine.

RUDOLF, C. P. B.—Six feet tall, light curly hair, blue eyes, and weighs about one hundred and sixty pounds. Left home, in Minnesota, in June, 1929. Mother is very ill. Please come home, or write to your daughter, Evelyn, care of this magazine.

BRADLEY, BART.—Left Tennessee about fifty years ago. Information appreciated by his cousin, Mrs. McDaniel, 2121 Dodds Avenue, Chattanooga, Tennessee.

MOON, ROBERT EMMETT.—Last heard from in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Information appreciated by his daughter, Florence Nell Moon, 713 Park Street, Morganstown, West Virginia.

HILDEBRAND, FORREST.—Left Bartlesville, Oklahoma, in 1928, en route for St. Louis, Missouri. Please write to Helena, care of this magazine.

CAMPBELL.—Would like to hear from any one having this name. Address Dick Campbell, Phoenix, Arizona.

BENSON.—Would like to hear from any one having this name. Dick Campbell, Phoenix, Arizona.

ATTENTION.—Buddies who served with the Second Replacement, A. E. F., and with the Third Prov. Guard Company, A. of O., in France, and Germany. Please write to Dick Campbell, Phoenix, Arizona.

NORMA.—Did not receive your letter until July 10th. You had left by that time. Please write to George, Johnstown, Pennsylvania.

COOVERT, WILL, and **MAGGIE DILLON,** and their children, **COONIE, CLEO** and **KATIE.**—Formerly of Champagne, Illinois. Lived in Topeka, Kansas, between 1890-92. Information appreciated by an old friend, Mrs. Katie Baer, 1038 East Twenty-eighth Street, North, Portland, Oregon.

SEAMAN, CHARLES.—Worked on a bridge between Anchorage, and Fairbanks, Alaska. Information appreciated by W. C. N., Box 120, Buckley, Washington.

GIBSON, SWAN, SARAH and **WILLIAM.**—Last heard from in Staples, Minnesota. Information appreciated by Ray Bailey, Route 2, Port Orchard, Washington.

DUVAL, FLORENCE MYRTLE.—Seventeen years old. Last heard from in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, in August, 1927. Information appreciated by an old friend, Mildred Ashton, Box 11, John Day, Oregon.

PEPPERS, NORMAN.—Have important information for you. Please write to P. S. Bartlett, 131 East Jefferson Street, South Bend, Indiana.

FRED.—Please write to Mamma, care of this magazine.

NOTICE.—When you said good-by on the sidewalk, the night of the third of July, years ago, you promised to make me happy, and not to forget me. Please write to Marie, care of this magazine.

HARDEN, CHARLES RAYMOND.—Please write to M. Cooper, 469 Vernon Street, San Francisco, California.

WRIGHT, RICHARD L.—Enlisted in Troop C, Twelfth Cavalry, at Fort Robinson, Nebraska. Last heard from in the Hospital Camp, at Fort D. A. Russell, Wyoming, in January, 1917. Information appreciated by his mother, Mrs. Annie L. Wright, Route 3, Box 78, Montgomery, Alabama.

PALMER, ELDRED, and **ELMER TUGLE.**—Left San Angelo, Texas, in December, 1927. Please write to Ira W. Wilcher, 2031 Clark Street, Augusta, Georgia.

L. E. D.—Am still doing well. Haven't seen D. H. for some time. Hope to be out soon. Please write to Babe, care of this magazine.

MARTIN, LIGE.—Seventy-five years old. Left Waterville, Mississippi, about thirty-five years ago. Information concerning him, or his descendants, appreciated by his grandniece, Lyda Martin Bradley, Box 586, Sallisaw, Oklahoma.

NICHOLS, CHARLIE.—Twenty-two years old. Light-brown hair and blue eyes. Left home three years ago. Information appreciated by his mother, Jennie Nichols, 716 North Zunis Street, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

McGREGOR, EDWARD ELISON.—Your mother is very ill, and wants you. Please write to B. B., 715 Second Street, Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

THOMPSON, JAMES HERBERT.—Last seen in Long Beach, California, in 1923. Elsie has not forgotten you and longs to see your father. Please write to Elsie Thompson Hemenway, 502 South Comstock Avenue, Whittier, California.

STEELE, GEORGE HAROLD.—Father is dead and mother is very ill. She is in Knoxville. Please write to Aunt Em C., Box 64, Alpha, Illinois.

MURPHY, HARRY ISOM.—We are holding a letter from Ethel, for you. Please send for it.

MARY J. S.—Five feet, eight inches tall, weighs about one hundred and sixty pounds, black hair and brown eyes. Last seen in Little Washington, Pennsylvania. I still love you, and forgive everything. Please write to Billie, care of this magazine.

BOB.—Remember April 30 and July 26, 1924? We need you. Let's start again. Please come home or write to D., 50 Sheridan Street, Pontiac, Michigan.

GRAY, ESTHER.—When last heard from, in 1918, lived at 117 South Street, Utica, New York. Please write to your old friend, Mrs. Joseph H. Brown, Jr., 2847a Benton Street, St. Louis, Missouri.

HALLEY, CORA.—Formerly of Piedmont, Missouri. When last heard from, in 1919, lived at 1609 Market Street, St. Louis, Missouri. Please write to your old friend, Mrs. Joseph H. Brown, Jr., 2847a Benton Street, St. Louis, Missouri.

HELLER, EDNA.—Formerly of St. Louis, Missouri. Last heard from in Ballwin, Missouri, in 1921. Please write to your old friend, Mrs. Joseph H. Brown, Jr., 2847a Benton Street, St. Louis, Missouri.

KELLY, HAZEL.—Formerly of Galesburg, Illinois. Worked for the Union News Company at Hannibal, Missouri, in 1919. Later worked in St. Louis, Missouri. Please write to your old friend, Mrs. Joseph H. Brown, Jr., 2847a Benton Street, St. Louis, Missouri.

MATTHEWS, ZELLA.—Had one brother in the army, stationed at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, and another in the Philippine Islands, in 1918. At that time she was a student nurse at the Barnes Hospital, in St. Louis, Missouri, and was living at Thirteenth and Chamber Streets, in St. Louis. Please write to your old friend, Mrs. Joseph H. Brown, Jr., 2847a Benton Street, St. Louis, Missouri.

O'DONNELL, CORA or **JEANETTE.**—Formerly of Mission, Texas. Was last heard from in Galveston, Texas, two years ago. Please write to your old friend, Mrs. Joseph H. Brown, Jr., 2847a Benton Street, St. Louis, Missouri.

HYATT, JESSE WILLIAM.—Five feet, ten inches tall, weighs about one hundred and seventy-five pounds, blue eyes and brown hair. Left home in August, 1928, and has not been heard from since. Information appreciated by his wife, Mrs. Jesse Hyatt, Plano, Illinois.

TURNER, CLAUDE, and son, **DAROLD.**—Left Laramie, Wyoming, in 1916, and have not been heard from since. My father and brother. I am ill, and need their help. Information appreciated by Darlene Turner, 1533 Madison Street, Oakland, California.

DAVIS, COY.—Do you remember writing me a card from Cincinnati, Ohio? I left West Virginia, in September, 1928. Please write to your old pal, E., care of this magazine.

WALLACE, MATTIE LOU.—Last heard from in Hawthorne, California. Please write to Geneva, care of this magazine.

D. L. P.—You are forgiven. Have settled with Cork & Bond. Please write to H. P., care of this magazine.

NELSON, PETER W.—Last heard from in Benton Harbor, Michigan. Mother worries about you. Please write to your sister, Mrs. Russell May, Route 3, Port Huron, Michigan.

JACK.—No matter what happens I love you. Sugar and son miss you. Please write to Retta, care of this magazine.

McCANN, MAGGIE MAY, and **GROTWOLD, ESTHER ROOSEVELT.**—My daughters. Maggie was born at the Lancaster County Hospital, Lancaster City, Pennsylvania, thirty years ago. She was adopted from there when she was three years old. Esther was born in a hospital in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and was adopted from there when she was four years old. I was very ill at the time and unable to look after my children. Information appreciated by Mrs. Mary K. Brown, 1022 North Adams Street, Peoria, Illinois.

PACTON, DANIEL.—About eighteen years old. Blond hair and blue eyes. Worked on a farm near Austin, Minnesota. Please write to your sister, Mary Kinann, 1509 Eleventh Avenue, South, Fargo, North Dakota.

BURNS, SHORTY.—Please write to H. J. H., care of this magazine.

CARLISLE, A. E.—Please come home or write to Mother, care of this magazine.

SHURM, NORMAN and **FRED.**—My brother and father. Lived at one time in Sheffield, Pennsylvania. Information appreciated by Mrs. Gladys Gowins, Route 2, East Canton, Ohio.

CARTER, BENJAMIN FRANKLIN.—My father. Married Lillie Shephard, at Harrisburg, Illinois, and later they separated. Last heard from in 1896. Information appreciated by Burl Carter Baker, 2412 West Brown Street, Alton, Illinois.

DANIELS, RALPH E.—Please write to your niece, Mrs. Bernice Dare, 803 Gilbert Avenue, Kalamazoo, Michigan.

SON.—There has been no news. Trust you to keep the promise made to me in the maize field. Please write to Mamma, care of this magazine.

LYONS.—Would like to hear from relatives of Thomas Lyons. He is nearly seventy years old, and in poor health. Was born in Boston, Massachusetts, and left there at the age of seventeen. Please write to Reader, care of this magazine.

BABY HOLIEN.—Born in Lancaster City, Pennsylvania, in 1900. I was taken sick when he was very small, and the baby was sent to the orphan asylum, and was later adopted from there. Information appreciated by Mrs. Mary K. Brown, 1022 North Adams Street, Peoria, Illinois.

PIERCE, JACK.—Baby and I want you so much. Please come home or write to Jo, care of this magazine.

GARDINER, OLIVER JARVIS.—Last heard from in Springford, Ontario, Canada. Information appreciated by Mary Gardiner Coughlin, 2170 University Avenue, Morgantown, West Virginia.

VIOLET.—Please forgive me. I am heartbroken by our quarrel. I did not mean all that was said at Superior, Montana. Baby was born in November, 1928. We did not go on to Vancouver. Please write to your mother, Mrs. John Gordon, Oakland, California.

KING, PATRICK.—Twenty-nine years old. Five feet, seven inches tall, black hair and blue eyes. Left Scranton, Pennsylvania, nine years ago. Information appreciated by his mother, Mrs. Michael Art King, 2905 Pittston Avenue, Scranton, Pennsylvania.

COOK, MRS. MARY.—Last heard from in Morrisville, New York. Please write to your brother, Bennie Gifford, Battery B, Tenth F. A., Fort Lewis, Washington.

BENKER, MRS. C. J.—Last heard from in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1921. Please write to your brother, Bennie Gifford, Battery B, Tenth F. A., Fort Lewis, Washington.

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